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Inside:
Maximo Vs. Army of Zin
Otogi: Myth of Demons
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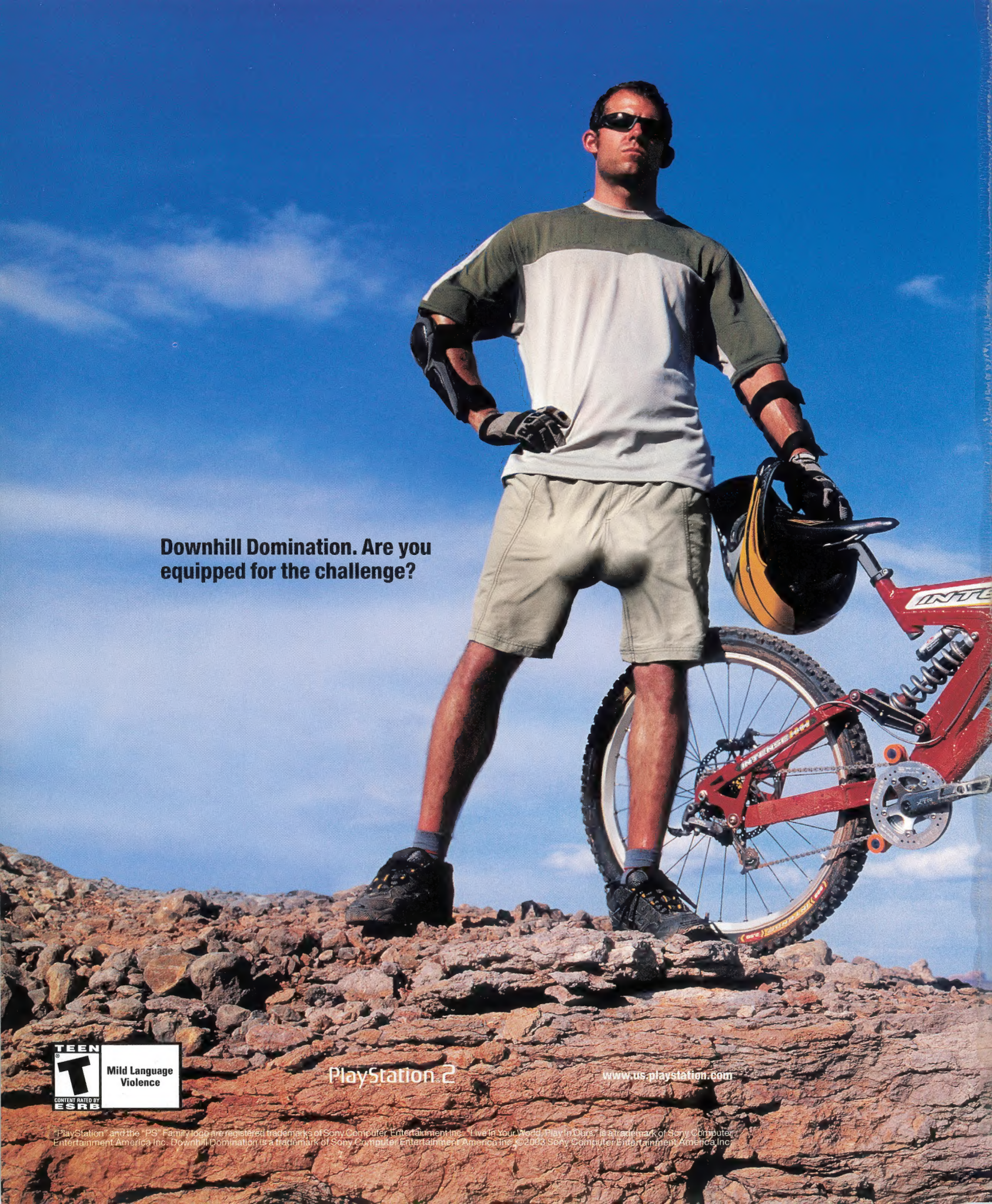
Downhill Domination. Are you equipped for the challenge?
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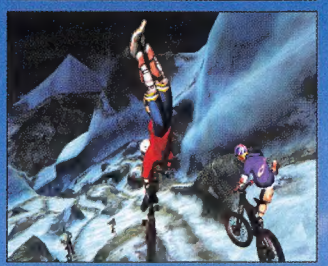

Sack up, gentlemen. The first downhill mountain bike racing game for PlayStation 2 is here. Introducing Downhill Domination,™ where to get to the top you have to get to the bottom first. That means bombing down wickedly steep mountains. Busting tricks off 100-foot cliffs. And brawling your way past opponents with a combat system that lets you punch, kick and even hurl water bottles. The prize? The latest high-tech bike parts and sponsorships from real-world manufacturers. And the most admired *cojones* on the mountain.

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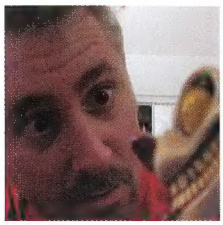

Meeting after meeting—it seems like I spend half of each issue in assorted conference rooms, on IM or on the phone—it is now crystal-clear that a large percentage of the game industry is changing. While "hardcore" gamers will still get their fix, companies without the benefit of bankable franchises, or that are looking to branch out into the "mainstream," are going straight for the money, and the green, at least for now, seems bathed in red. Get ready for a glut of realistic war games and violence the likes that you have never seen. GTA has taken the nation's temperature and it's boiling hot for killing machines. Back when MK and Time Killers threatened to taint the minds of our youth, I was driving the bandwagon, shouting back that cartoon violence was no more harmful than Looney Tunes, but now I find myself teetering, wondering if maybe they have gone too far. Gaming is now a powerful industry and therefore not such an easy target for the political naysayers of the world. They need votes and/or public approval, so gaming is just too big to attack. But left to our own devices, what have we done? I'm seeing games all around me that I believe really would harm a child, badly, if not teenagers; when I hear from retailers that these types of games are all they want to buy, it's a bit disconcerting.

Take Midway's The Suffering for example; within the first five minutes of the game, mentions of baby rape and inmate banter of a most lewd and disgusting nature are spoken in NC-17 form, followed by bodies being shredded, ripped in half, crawling with exposed entrails, leaving streams of realistic blood. The halls echo with death before the protagonist yanks a knife out of a corpse and begins hacking away, spraying himself with more and more blood until he's nearly completely red. Not to say I'm against these types of games coming out; on the contrary, this is adult entertainment that fans of gore and psychodrama have every right to play (the game is actually based in the supernatural and quite well done), but it seems really close to the line, wherever that may be.

There's a new trend in war games, too, called rag-doll, where slain bodies fall and hang with the utmost realism, as do shredded or torn limbs as bodies are blown to bits. So much death; whatever happened to fantasy and wonder? This is where we're headed, directly into the hell every human hopes to avoid? Isn't it ironic that EA killed Thrill Kill back in the day, a fictional fighting game where mutants hopped around in dank locales like something out of a Manson video, but now you can target a soldier's temple and kill him dead in cold blood in MoH? When did the lines become so blurred? When did the "mainstream" become so bloodthirsty? So Rockstar built an empire on a real-time mob adventure, does that mean that half the industry has to switch gears? As violent as GTA is, Rockstar games also contain a certain flare, retro style, and a very specific quality that makes them tasteful and to a degree cartoonish. I'm wondering if the sudden rush to produce violent content isn't a little premature. I suppose time will tell.

The positive in all of this change is that developers and publishers alike have both come to the realization that platformers and adventure games are in fact as "mature," if not more so, than current M-rated games. Kids aren't buying surreal critter games; it's the people who came up playing games from Miyamoto, Yuji Naka, Treasure, Capcom and Konami who want them, so platformers, adventures and action-RPGs will remain a driving force. They may even grow up to meet our current sensibilities. There are plenty of companies out there making content akin to what got us here (Square Enix, Konami, Capcom, Sega, Nintendo, MGS, Blizzard, Universal, Atari, Sony, etc.), I just find it disturbing that so much blood is being spilled elsewhere. I suppose that's the great thing about America...although people who sell and play these games need to act responsibly, because now, these games really are dangerous.

Before I go, I must again ask the question that continues to plague me. We live in a society of double standards where money talks and morality walks. Alcohol is legal even though it kills thousand every year, yet other substances are illegal that cause people to laugh and drive 20. You can show graphic death on TV but not nudity, which is as natural as waking up everyday. So, the question: why aren't developers pushing the sexual envelope to cash in rather than the violence envelope? The lesser of the two isn't even an evil, so why not? They're M-rated. Show me Lara straddling her next victim in a cutscene, assets bouncing in the night, and I'll show you the next mega-blockbuster. So what of it? As usual, your opinions are welcome.

On a lighter note, this was a very special issue for us, as we finally got the opportunity to put together the Castlevania retrospective we've wanted to bring you for some time, so we hope you enjoy it. Special thanks to Tammy, Jason and Pete at Konami for helping us make it happen. On that note, one more question...on the cover: lots of cover lines or clean? Your wish is our command.

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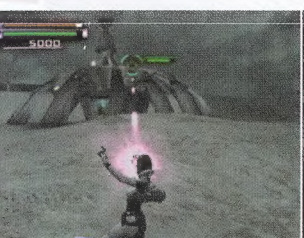

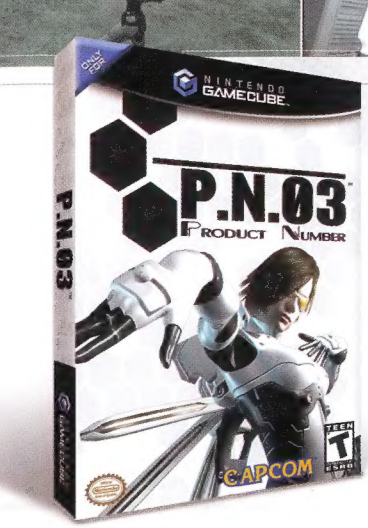

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Castlevania: Lament of Innocence

"...Lament is very much Symphony of the Night in 3D, drawing parallels at almost every turn..."

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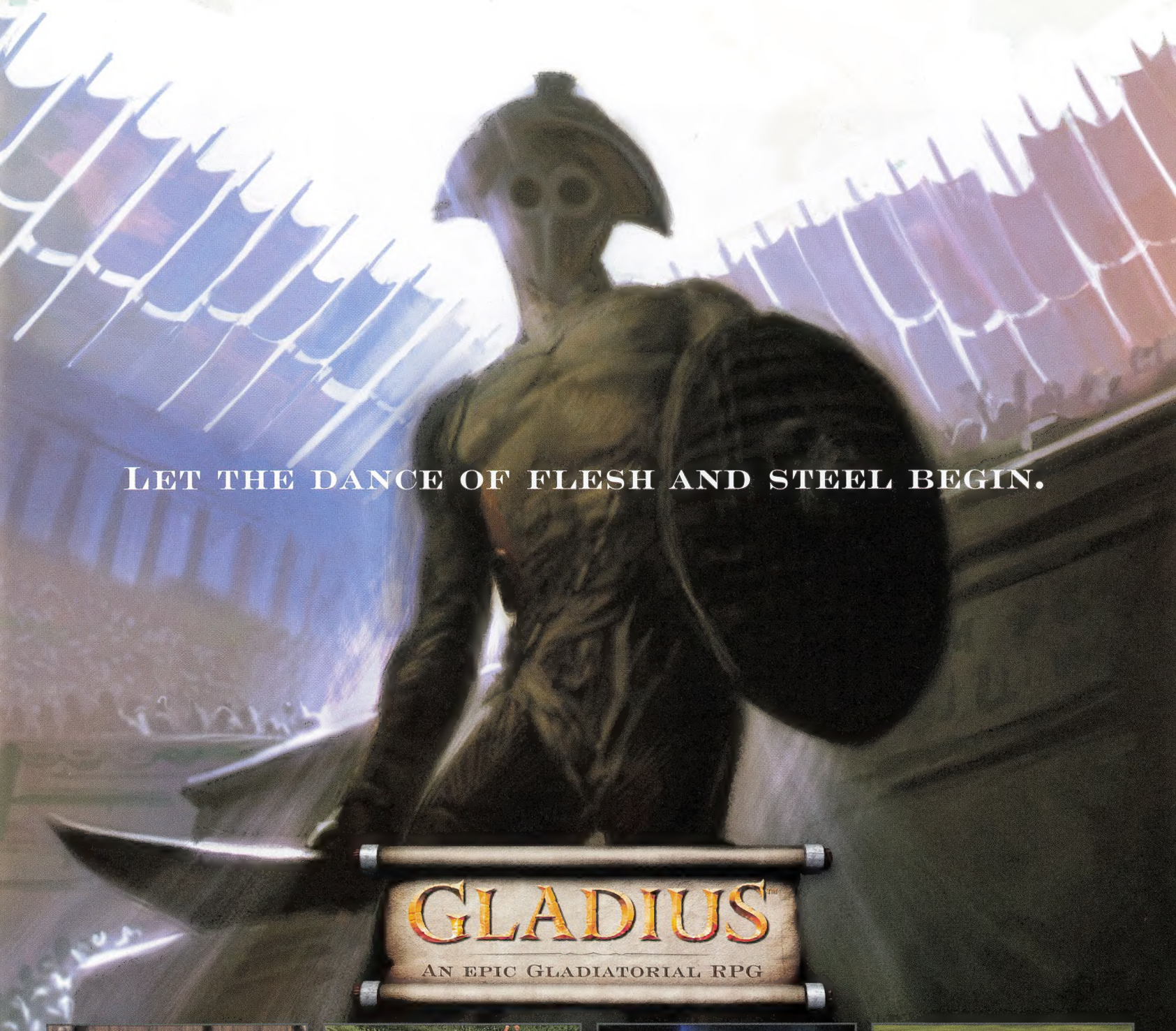

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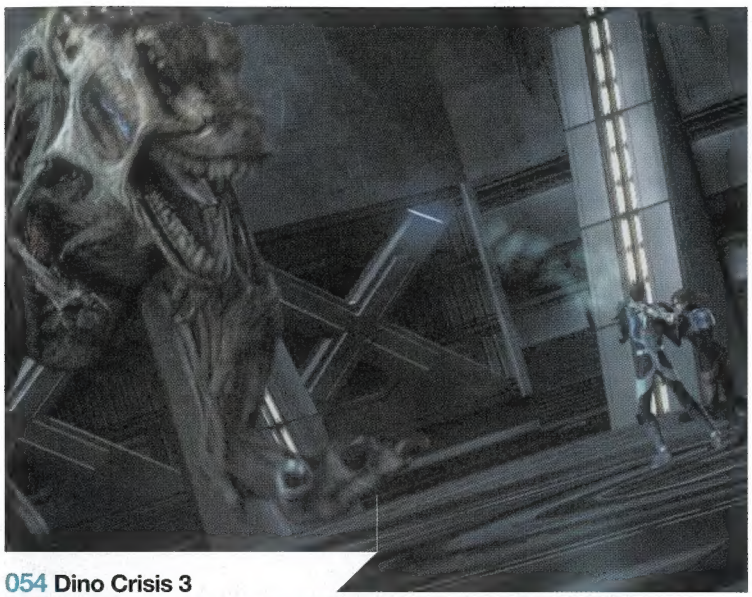

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GAME BOY ADVANCE

ORBITAL MEDIA

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

Matte or Gloss?

I just wanted to say I have been getting **play** since it hit the newsstands, I have every issue. I am a subscriber, and I really love the mag. Thing is though I just got my new issue in the other day with P.N.03 on the cover and I was reading how you guys are using some new paper to print the mag on, well, I don't like the look of the paper. The blacks look all washed out, and I was reading it outside and the damn ink started melting on my thumb, lol. I mean no biggie, I still love the mag, I just like the old glossy paper better, this stuff seems too rough.

Chaz

Matte

I just received my new issue of **play** in the mail today...and to say that I'm impressed is an understatement. I open it to discover the incredible paper quality...has only gotten better. Upon searching through the magazine, I discover an updated ratings system, which was sorely needed. Improved layout, even better art...I was simply blown away.

Reading another adult-oriented magazine recently, Playboy, I came to the realization that there are many parallels between **play** and the aforementioned magazine. Think about it...**play** is geared more towards gamers that have a high level of maturity. Playboy is geared towards men with a high level of maturity. With Playboy, if you walk into any store that sells magazines of its ilk, you're going to find similar ones that offer much more content in the way of naked pictures. Often times, these magazines are sleazy, generally unappealing, and definitely for men who are looking to just get their jollies off. With Playboy, once you ogle the beautiful women, there's a lot of useful content in there that makes it a much more worthwhile magazine than the others. The same applies to **play**. Why bother with the boys' magazines, when you can buy a man's magazine?

So I say, let the boys go buy "Jugz." I'll stick with the magazines for the men, as is the case with **play**.

Jamie B.

Well, take those types of comparisons all day since we are obviously trying to establish ourselves as being for mature gamers without selling out. Mature doesn't necessarily mean 10 pages on Vice City or T. Hawk 27, but rather, a good read that covers the best the industry has to offer. Now if we could only sneak in those naked pictures of Wario... Regarding the new paper, we're still working out the bugs (blacks, wrinkling, etc.), but 10-1 the readers like the new stuff. It will get consistently better from here though, promise.

It's about Time

The other day I was browsing through a magazine when I came across an ad for the upcoming (or at this point, recently released) PC version of Vice City. As is usually the case for delayed re-releases and ports of chart-topping games, this ad featured a few quotes from various publications, each proclaiming either how great the PS2 version is, or how improved the PC version is. One of the quotes in the ad was from Time magazine, and while I don't remember the exact wording, it basically stated that while Grand Theft Auto (I love how they leave the 3 off, forgetting the mediocre first games) was a national phenomenon, Vice City bordered on something even greater: art.

A few thoughts went through my mind as I processed those words. Some positive, some negative, some conflicting: "Who the heck does Time have working for them that is qualified to review games?" "Finally, games have been accepted by the mainstream to the point where Time will actually donate space for them." And finally, "What the hell do you mean *bordering* on art, pal?" I'm not about to put my effort into arguing whether or not GTA: VC merits as art or not—rather, I'm more concerned, or at least puzzled, that it has taken until the advent of GTA's popularity for the mainstream to look around and acknowledge games in general as an art form. I don't know about anyone else, but I thought games were *bordering* on art as we were exiting the 16-bit era.

It seems almost unfair that it has taken so long for so many people to open their eyes and start viewing video games as a medium for presenting art. Not unfair to me, of course, but to the men and women who put so many hours into their work, only for it to be scoffed at as less than worthy of being called art. More than likely, video game designers in the early days of gaming knew their decidedly narrow audience, knew there were a select few (relatively) who would appreciate their work as more than means to entertain a child while mommy and daddy were at work. Still, I've never heard of a music critic refusing to think of cinema as a valid medium for art, or a cinema-buff refusing to acknowledge Mozart as a genius. But try explaining the genius of a Miyamoto, a Yu Suzuki or a Hideo Kojima to the hardened connoisseur or even casual fan of any other medium, and you were likely to get some funny looks over the years.

But the fact remains, as much of a jump as 'bordering on art' may be from being laughed out of the building when presenting the idea that games are art, the fact still remains that 'bordering on art' isn't the same as being acknowledged as art. Games still carry a stigma that many are either unwilling or unable to work around in order to view them not only as a means for entertainment, but a means for sending a message and sharing ideas. True, the aspects of the other mediums are getting some recognition—and about time. There's no reason why the level designers shouldn't be held in the same light as Hollywood set designers. There's no reason why Metal Gear Solid's script shouldn't receive the same kind of adulation as it would if it were a blockbuster movie (and we all know it would). While it's great that so many in the field of games are getting recognition for incorporating art into games, games IMO are still not looked at as art in and of themselves.

Why not? Again, I can only give my best guess, and that is that games as a medium are very close to that of television and cinema. As such, when the use of music, dynamic camera angles, and Hollywood-esque writing are used to enhance a gaming moment, it is often looked at as gaming "borrowing" from its cousin in order to make itself appeal to a wider range of consumers. Perhaps that's a just assessment. In my opinion, games will not be looked at as art within themselves until the aspect that sets them apart from television and cinema is looked at as art: the gameplay. Pulling off a combo in a fighting game, unleashing a particularly beautiful series of maneuvers in Devil May Cry, unlocking everything in Castlevania or Super Metroid...when was the last time that it was the actual gameplay that was described as art as opposed to the cinemas that fit between them? I feel a little silly saying it myself, but until the masses start to see something as simple as a well-placed platform jump in Mario, or the well-timed sneak in Metal Gear as art, then gaming will always be *bordering* on

"It seems almost unfair that it has taken so long for so many people to open their eyes and start viewing video games as a medium for presenting art."

art—even ten years from now.

This of course is just my opinion, what do you think? You've been playing games for a lot longer than I have after all (I'm only 18, I started in 1988, and didn't start *appreciating* it till about 1995). Why do you think games are still looked at by many as a less-than-valid medium for art? Or do you? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Sascha Lichtenstein

First of all, for 18, you're a heck of a writer. Regarding Time's statement, we agree with you 110 percent, but moreover, they discover this with Vice City? What about Final Fantasy X, Panzer Dragoon Orta, or any number of games that contain imagined characters that far exceed the boundaries of anything Hollywood has to offer? This is a perfect example of why the "mainstream" in this country still has no idea what video games are really all about. They know it's big business, and see it as either juvenile or violent, with no clue how enriching it has been and continues to be. The reason is unfortunately (as is always the case) money. These publications need to seem "in-the-know" to stay viable but aren't necessarily interested in researching what they consider pop culture. It's a lot easier to spout off about something obvious, like Vice City. Elsewhere, men's magazines review games based on press releases before playables are even available and entertainment magazines continue to cover all the wrong games for all the wrong reasons. Hence we make play. If only we had their databases!

More gamer tattoos!

Link: Ryan "Kaiokenattack" Barrett Gungrave: Rod Peters

Paint 'em black!

As my trembling fingers dove into a fresh issue of **play** for the twelfth time, they registered an observation before I even looked further then the cover: matte. I am as yet attempting to comprehend how I feel about this drastic change in the page properties of my favorite magazine. While apprehensive at first, I later realized that the matte paper makes it less easy to place figure prints on the beautiful art inside. I think this is a positive change, but may require getting used to. Moving on, I very much agree with Dave H. on his ideas of platformers. I tend to be drawn to dark, Gothic games with strong controllable females such as BloodRayne or Primal, yet I have to agree when it comes down to it I enjoy playing games like Sly Cooper and Ratchet & Clank much more. The concept of an adult platformer never even occurred to me but it's very interesting. I can't seem to get away from the idea of "cute" platformers and when I read the idea I automatically got the image of a cute little Goth girl witch running around with a pet cat. Anyway, I realize this is not what you were speaking of, but it seems like a funnier idea. Malice, but darker and more mature (here's the type of thing I am talking about http://www.rachaelhuntington.com/). Anyway, that's my two cents for now. Thanks for the wonderful magazine.

(P.S. I'm still feverishly waiting for Lara Croft's guns to be pointing at me out of the cover!!!)

You read my mind! I couldn't agree more. This is the direction platformers need to go in. Rachel's designs are awesome. As for a Tomb Raider cover, lord knows we tried but Eidos wouldn't fork over a playable under any circumstances and we have a policy to never do a cover based on hype alone; we did it once and the game turned out to be a dog, so Lara had to sit this year out. We need to "feel" a game in-house for it to land on the cover. That said, the new Tomb Raider, slowdown and all, exceeded my expectations, so in this case we would have been safe...but you never know.

Bananas

As the monkey gave way to man, so has the gaming 2D world for a 3D one, affixed with numerous suffixes, prequels, sequels and occasionally a retrofit to placate the old-school types, you know...us older chimps. It's called evolution, Darwinism for gamers and no longer shall we be forced to buy over-priced, cartridge-based systems and stupid things to put on our heads for controllers! Extinction has not been kind; bless the Dreamcast, may it reside in peace in the afterlife along with a number of great games that have been hoarded and sold over eBay for ludicrous amounts of bananas. But each one of these fallouts has made gaming bigger, faster and much, much better. We screamed and beat our little chests when these events and more have rocked our simple little video world but we grew and moved on like busy little apes playing with our Xboxes, PS2s and our funny purple lil' Cubes eagerly awaiting the next generation to slap us in the face like a pound of, well, more bananas. But again, as the games have grown so have our skills, our opposable thumbs working furiously over more complex and challenging games, so much in fact they've become easier, or is it so? Perhaps it's not the games that are getting easier more than the simple fact we have gotten better, forcing the gorillas who make our games to stop picking the mites off their competitors' backs and make their own damn games, cheaters suck even in our wild kingdom. And we have no intentions of slowing down; they have to make bigger and better games, or someone else will give us a bigger tree to climb, err, or play with, so ha! Now who's on top of the food chain?

Jerimiah O.

Er, okay...time to lay off the Donkey Kong, dude...

He's-a-Wario, He's-a-gonna-win!

As usual, you're right on the money. Wario World is one of my most anticipated games. I know you love the platformer/action adventure genre as I do—the special magic that happens when great animators, programmers and level designers do it up right. These games are the heart and soul of gaming. The immensely talented people who have brought us Mario, Jax, Ico, Zelda, Blinx, Herdy Gerdy, Klonoa, Maximo and many wonderful others are the great artists of our time. Painting a masterpiece is an unbelievable accomplishment, but it's one frame, one picture, one composition. How spectacular to paint 30-60 frames a second, animating character, props, backgrounds, sound, music and camera. Now, don't get me wrong, I own over 300 console games and enjoy them all but when I beat a fighter, racer, FPS, RPG, etc. I get a rush...feel relief...have a sense of accomplishment. When I play a great platformer I feel the blood, sweat and tears the developer has poured into the game. These amazing games lift the spirit...when truly great, they impart...joy. That is worth every last bit of my hard-earned $50 and the reason I PLAY.

To your continued success,

Terry D

...Amen!

Fanboys?

I am a big fan of your slick magazine, but in the July issue I saw some inaccurate info that might just keep me from buying future issues. What I am talking about is how you guys kept saying that cross-platform games run better on Xbox. I was truly shocked when I first read that...cause I expect to read that sort of inaccurate info on mags like...not **play** .

What bothered me the most is that as I read the magazine, I saw this same inaccurate info being repeated a couple times throughout the whole issue. In one small preview you even say "Although cross-platform (therefore best on Xbox, then GC, then PS2)." Now that truly bothered me. When I read that, I instantly realized that there are some fanboys within your staff. Cross-platform games DO sometimes run better on Xbox, but this is not always true. Take NBA Street 2, NFS2, or SSX Tricky for example, those games look and run better on PS2. If you play both versions you would realize that those games run better on PS2. Some games just benefit more from PS2 hardware than Xbox's. I hope in the future you guys will think more carefully before posting such false information throughout the magazine. You guys have something good going, but it all might just start to crumble down if readers start to notice such fanboy-ism. Thanks for your time.

Keire

If by fanboys, you mean we like fans... guilty! It's really hot here! Seriously though, we have no intention of playing favorites, it's simply what we hear day in and day out from every developer and publisher, including EA. That said, EA games are pretty much created equal, although Street is a little smoother on X. Their Harry Potter game was also best on the Box, Cube second and PS2 third; that's not an opinion, it's a fact. When everything else is equal, games run better on Xbox; the hardware makes it so. What makes a system great is exclusive content, and all three platforms have amazing franchise titles. The SNES whooped the Genesis hardware-wise but many liked Sega better... We talk to developers and publishers every day, and when it comes to their Xbox version, they are expected to deliver some aspect of the game that takes advantage of the hardware. That's what new hardware is for. They're doing pretty good, I'd say. In the end, it's all about the games. However, the fact remains that 99 percent of the cross-platform games out there run best on Xbox, with the exception of a few like Turok: Evolution (which runs best on GameCube). In terms of bias...not on this staff. Half these guys are walking around the office playing Wario Ware...

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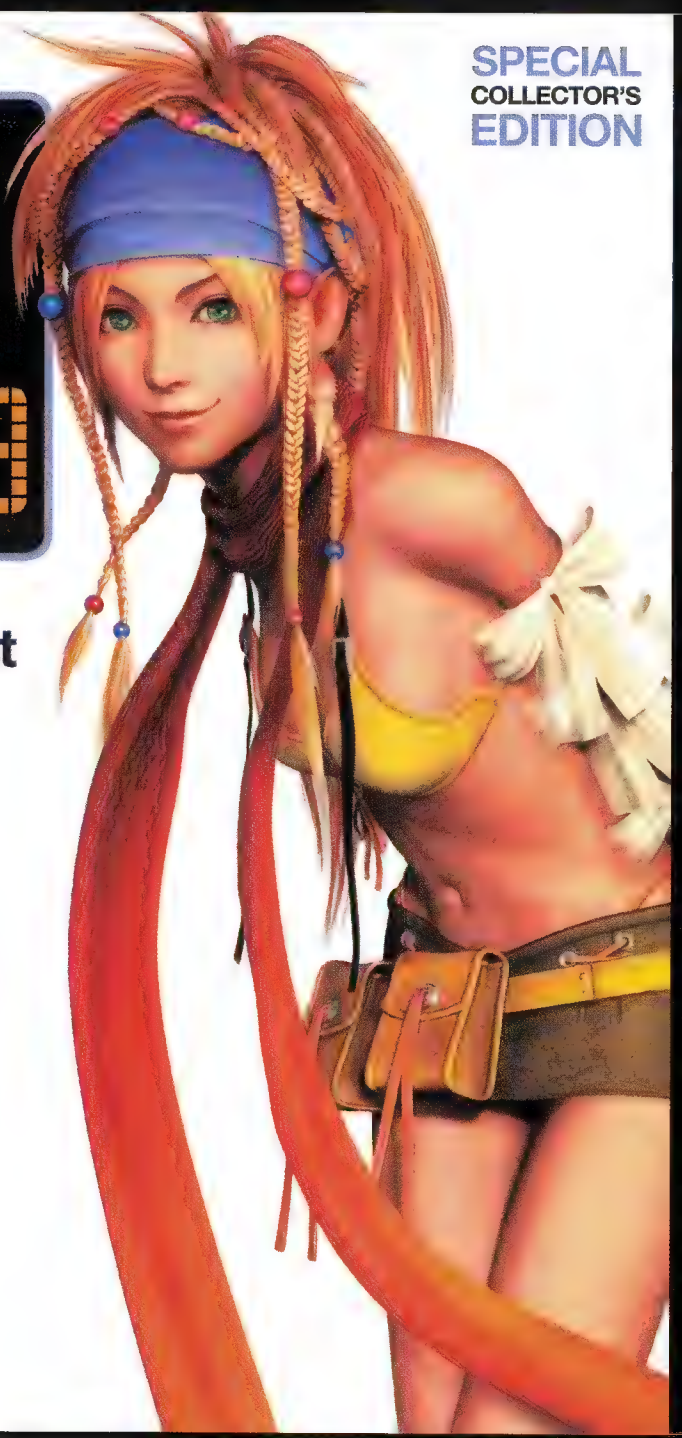

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MATURE
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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MATURE
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Blood and Gore
Strong Lyrics
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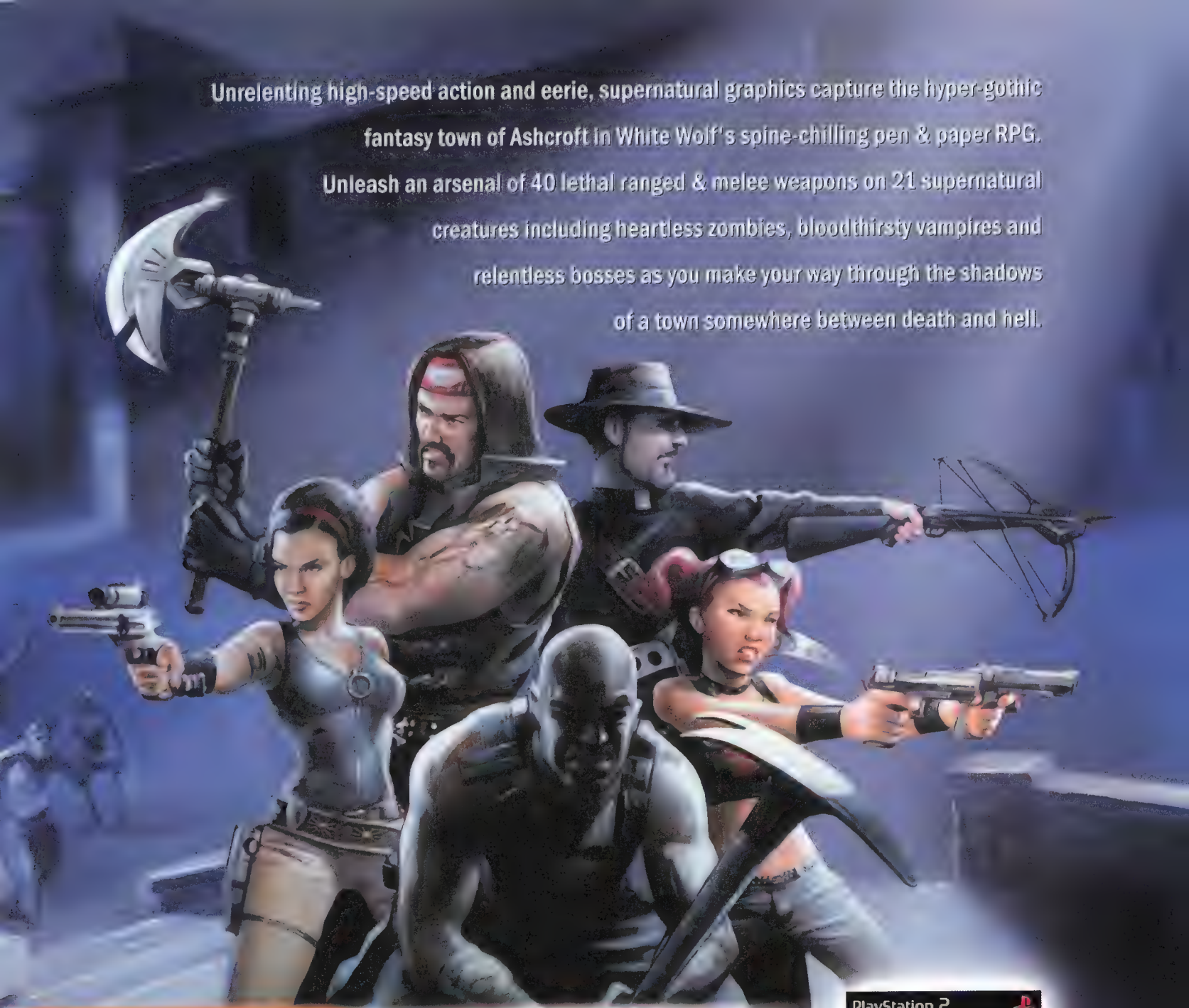

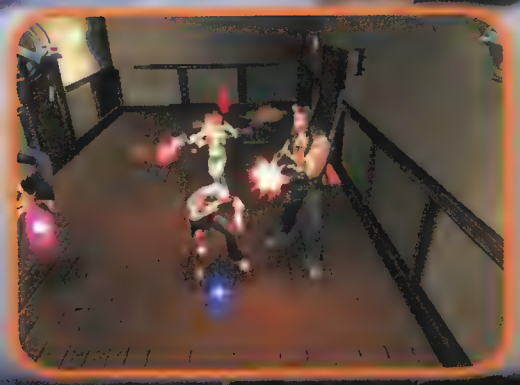

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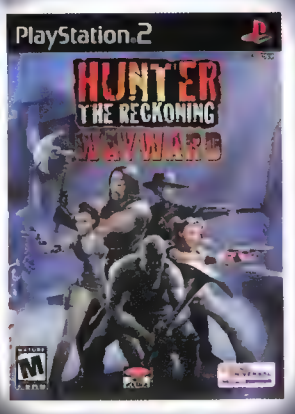

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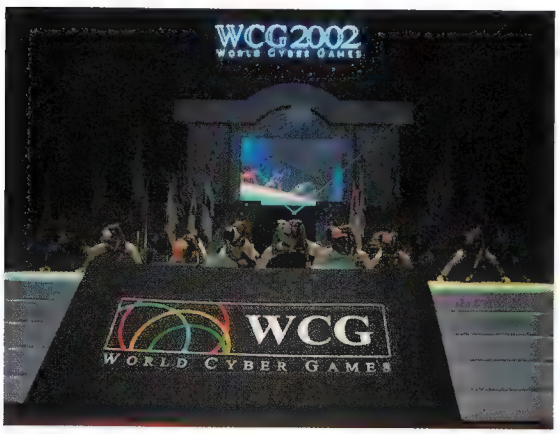
Show them the money

The video game Olympics? Nah, they're gettin' paid!

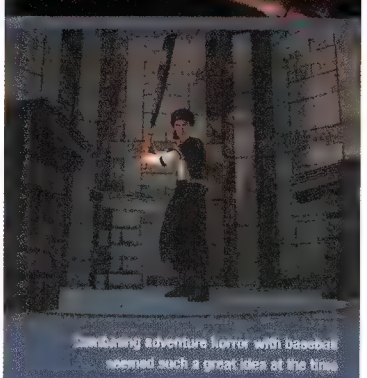


When the first-ever Ultimate Gamers Expo (UGE) kicks off on August 15-17, anyone with the means can unite at the Los Angeles Convention Center for a gathering of all that is big in the gaming world. In addition to discounted products on sale, sponsored in part by EB Games, live entertainment, gameplay, sports, demos, contests and a wide assortment of other cool events will provide an overload of sights and sounds of all things video games. One of the major draws of the event will be the conclusion of the U.S. stretch of the Samsung World Cyber Games (SWCG), the world's largest e-sports competition, involving over 300,000 gamers across 55 countries. The four-month qualification for the tournament involved 300 rounds of play in 20 locations in the U.S. alone. Winners from the finals at the UGE event will be a part of Team USA, going on to Seoul, Korea on October 12-18, competing for $350,000 in prizes. The official games include Age of Mythology, FIFA Soccer 2003, Half-Life, Counter-Strike, Star Craft: Brood War, Unreal Tournament 2003, Halo and Warcraft III.

"...live entertainment, gameplay, sports, demos, contests and a wide assortment of other cool events will provide an overload of sights and sounds of all things video games."

Lights, camera, insanity!

Nintendo and Silicon Knights' Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem is the latest, and we'd say most exciting, video-game brand to be added to the burgeoning list of film and television adaptations. New York- and Los Angeles-based entertainment company Hypnotic, known for extensive talent recruitment and short-film acquisitions, has just bought the rights to the brooding game, with no concrete plans as to whether the project will be film or television. Whatever the purchased license's ultimate path, Hypnotic is now in charge of finances, development, actual production and distribution. "We are thrilled to once again work with Nintendo to extend this brand and its powerful story to the masses," said David Bartis, CEO, Hypnotic. "We are eager to get the project started and to leverage our relationships in both the entertainment and marketing worlds to propel Eternal Darkness onto yet another entertainment platform." While Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem was not a huge success by today's standards—210,000 copies sold through in America—its exceptional story of murder, psychosis and the black arts makes it one of the more promising licenses in some time.



Combining adventure horror with baseball seemed such a great idea at the time.

Err...let's try that again

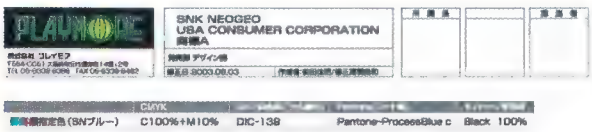
Calling it quits on June 20, Capcom producer Yoshiki Okamoto, who is credited for such heavy-hitters as the Resident Evil series, has decided to form a new studio, commenting that he has found certain problems with the way Capcom management views the future path of the company. Plans for Okamoto's new company originally included the name of Gamers Republic, which was dropped after learning of former American video-game magazine Gamers' Republic. Name issues aside, the company looks to begin operations immediately, with Okamoto serving as chief operating officer.

No more kidz stuff

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) has reworked its list of caveats to make you want to buy games even more, now that you know how crude and violent they actually are. Take a look at some changes that have been made to seemingly continue to make senators Joseph Lieberman and Herb Kohl so pleased:

- **Cartoon Violence** - Violent actions involving cartoon-like characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted.
- **Fantasy Violence** - Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life.
- **Intense Violence** - Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons and depictions of human injury and death.
- **Sexual Violence** - Depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts.

"I have always said the ESRB system was the best rating system in the entertainment media, and these changes will make it even better, more informative, more precise and more enforceable for retailers," said Lieberman. "I appreciate the ESRB's ongoing commitment to helping parents make smart choices for their kids. I hope parents will return the favor by making better use of these better ratings, for in the end they have the primary responsibility to protect their kids from potentially harmful games. And I hope retailers will finally accept their responsibility to help parents do that job, and commit as an industry to stop selling adult-rated games to kids."



Flat is where it's at

SNK rolls 2D out of the ICU and back into our lives

It seemed as if the game was over. The last life was lost, the timer counting down, all credits spent. But then at the last moment, someone popped another quarter into the machine, and industry mainstay SNK is back in the consumer software game. We shed tears when the company closed its doors a few years ago, but SNK officially reopened for business in America on June 1, 2003 in the form of New Jersey-based SNK Neo Geo USA Consumer Corp. Good news for them, great news for fans of classically styled 2D gaming everywhere.

SNK has also received the proverbial power-up in Japan: SNK and Playmore are now one and the same company. A recent court ruling determined that the SNK name, employees and assets belong to Playmore, and the company is expected to be renamed with the SNK moniker any day now. As SNK faithful know, when Aruze took the company in a pachinko-only direction, former SNK head honcho Eikichi Kawasaki left to form Playmore in 2001 and acquired the intellectual property rights to SNK's games. This is indeed the same SNK that created the Max 330 Mega Pro-Gear Spec.

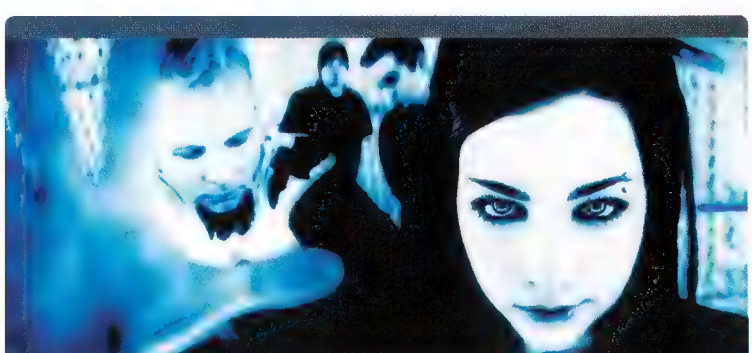
So what should we expect from the new SNK? First up are King of Fighters 2000 and King of Fighters 2001 for PlayStation 2, already available in Japan. If everything goes according to plan, the games could be released as a two-game set (in a single game case) as early as October. Next on the plate is the PS2 version of the awesome shooter Metal Slug 3, which also recently saw Japanese release. Beyond that, King of Fighters 2002 and Metal Slug 4 are in the works, along with SVC Chaos: SNK vs. Capcom and possibly some games for Game Boy Advance. The arcade version of SVC Chaos should be popping up around the country as you read this.

Expect to see King of Fighters 2000 and 2001, along with Metal Slug 3 from the newly christened SNK Neo Geo USA

Color schemes Hues'd SP 4 sale

It's been out for less than three months, and already the Game Boy Advance SP has moved more than 1.1 million systems off store shelves, continuing the stalwart success of Nintendo's portable market. In an effort to keep the enthusiasm boiling and lasso in even the hardcores who might already own the hardware, Nintendo is planning to release a couple more colors, Flame (also known as red) and Onyx (another term for black), on September 8.

The Onyx SP is one nice looking machine... The jury's still out on red



Evanescence wakes Link up inside

After their single "Bring Me to Life" became a TRL favorite and dominated radio play, alt-rock slicksters Evanescence have suddenly been living at the top of the charts, reaching double-platinum success prior to their upcoming summer tour. Beginning in Los Angeles on August 4 and heading to a late-September ending point in the Pacific Northwest, the band will be headlining their shows with the support of Nintendo, dubbed The Nintendo Fusion Tour. Joining Evanescence will be acts like Cold, Revis, Cauterize and Finger Eleven. Each event will offer a different experience, with Nintendo providing GameCubes and GBAs stocked with several modern titles as well as a few classics. Said 21-year-old Evanescence rocket-voice Amy Lee, "We're really looking forward to doing this tour. When we're on the road, we play music all night and Nintendo all day. This tour lets us bring two of our favorite things together."

VC's 2K goes ESPN with Sapp!

With the new season upon us, it's 1st and 10 for VC in their bid for pigskin power

In an effort to fully utilize the power of the ESPN license, Visual Concepts announced that its 2K series will now be labeled ESPN Videogames. More than a perceptible image change, the new name signifies an effort to also inject the ESPN attitude and distinction in to Visual Concepts' already stellar sports titles. With this newfound relationship, the games will see feature changes that include ESPN commentary and talent; how cool will it be to have Chris Berman recapping from the Sports Center Studio within the game? This is just the beginning of Visual Concepts' intentions to fully utilize the availability of the ESPN heritage.

The first game to have the new ESPN tag will be ESPN NFL Football, with Tampa Bay defensive tackle Warren Sapp as the new official spokesperson and cover athlete.

Minor details

Score one for the youth of the nation

The higher ups have spoken: By rescinding a St. Louis County ordinance that stated any video game containing graphic violence could not be sold to a minor, the US Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit sent a strong message within the subtext of their argument, supporting games as free speech. Part of the ruling was that games do indeed carry constitutional protection, falling under the same guidelines as literature and film. The records detail that storyboards and scripts from four of the games in question were submitted for scrutiny. The Court stated: "Our review of the record convinces us that these 'violent' video games contain stories, imagery, 'age-old themes of literature,' and messages, 'even an ideology,' just as books and movies do. Indeed, we find it telling that the County seeks to restrict access to these video games precisely because their content purportedly affects the thought or behavior of those who play them." The court continued, "We note, moreover, that there is no justification for disqualifying video games as speech simply because they are constructed to be interactive; indeed, literature is most successful when it 'draws the reader into the story, makes him identify with the characters, invites him to judge them and quarrel with them, to experience their joys and sufferings as the reader's own.'"

Grey Matters

You'll like how when he's green.

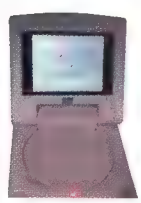
Now that the June box-office record has been handed over to the Hulk's impressive $62-million opening weekend, it's time to go back and see the movie again. Not just because the Hulk battling mutated dogs is so freaking cool but because you want to pay close attention to a hidden code that can be used in the Hulk video game. Dubbed the "Supercode," it opens the availability of Gray Hulk, which can be accessed at any computer port in the game. You can retrieve the Supercode from the scene where Bruce Banner becomes Hulk for the first time. "The 'Hulk' video game was designed with the goal of rewarding fans who experience both the movie and the game," said Nicholas Longano, VU Games' SVP of Marketing. "We created the Gray Hulk bonus gameplay as the ultimate payoff in which the key to the treasure is literally buried in the body of the film." Even cooler, additional features can be revealed with inputs corresponding to the movie's plots and characters. Check out www.thehulk.com for the clues and extras.

Dream a little dream

Can it be? Dreamcast on the go?

If it's true that as much as $650 million has been drained into pirate's pockets in 2002 as claimed by Nintendo alone, it's no wonder why the company has made recent aggressive attempts at squashing the problem. In Hong Kong, Lik Sang International and Visoly have been on the receiving end of Nintendo's pirating sledge-hammer, having judgements against them in upwards of HK $5 million, with future hearings pending.

And completely unrelated but not, Lik-Sang's website has recently posted info on an extremely illegal portable Dreamcast making the rounds in Hong Kong. Known as Treamcast, the system has all the portable trimmings—adapter, backlit LCD screen—and it apparently is compatible with American software. Price: $1200-1500 (Hong Kong). While this is of course technology infringing on just about every infringement in the book and has no blessing from Sega, it still must be said: how freaking cool?



3D Oh no!

It's no secret that house that Army Men built, 3DO, has long been in financial trouble. But those troubles came to a head this past May 28 when 3DO filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the Northern District of California, and the company was subsequently delisted from the NASDAQ stock exchange. However, this isn't necessarily the end of 3DO. The 3DO Company has continued to function and continues work on games it has in development, while at the same time pursuing a number of sale options, possibly selling off the entire company or individual games to interested parties. Interest has reportedly been high in Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and we wouldn't be at all surprised to see it published by another company.

Suits us fine...

Have you ever wanted to play dress-up with the skimpy bikinis showcased in Tecmo's very adult Dead or Alive Extreme Beach Volleyball? For the not-so-paltry price of $149.99, your fantasy become reality as long as you don't mind inputting your credit card number over at Tecmo's online store. Originally cooked up by Team Ninja to please the fans in Japan, these bathing suits are exact replicas of those worn by the ladies in the game. Unfortunately, if you want all five from the collection, you'll have to track down the Japan-only Lei-Fang school-girl number. The other four consist of Kasumi's Amaterasu, Ayane's Lamina, Tina's Asterope and Hitomi's Cepheus.

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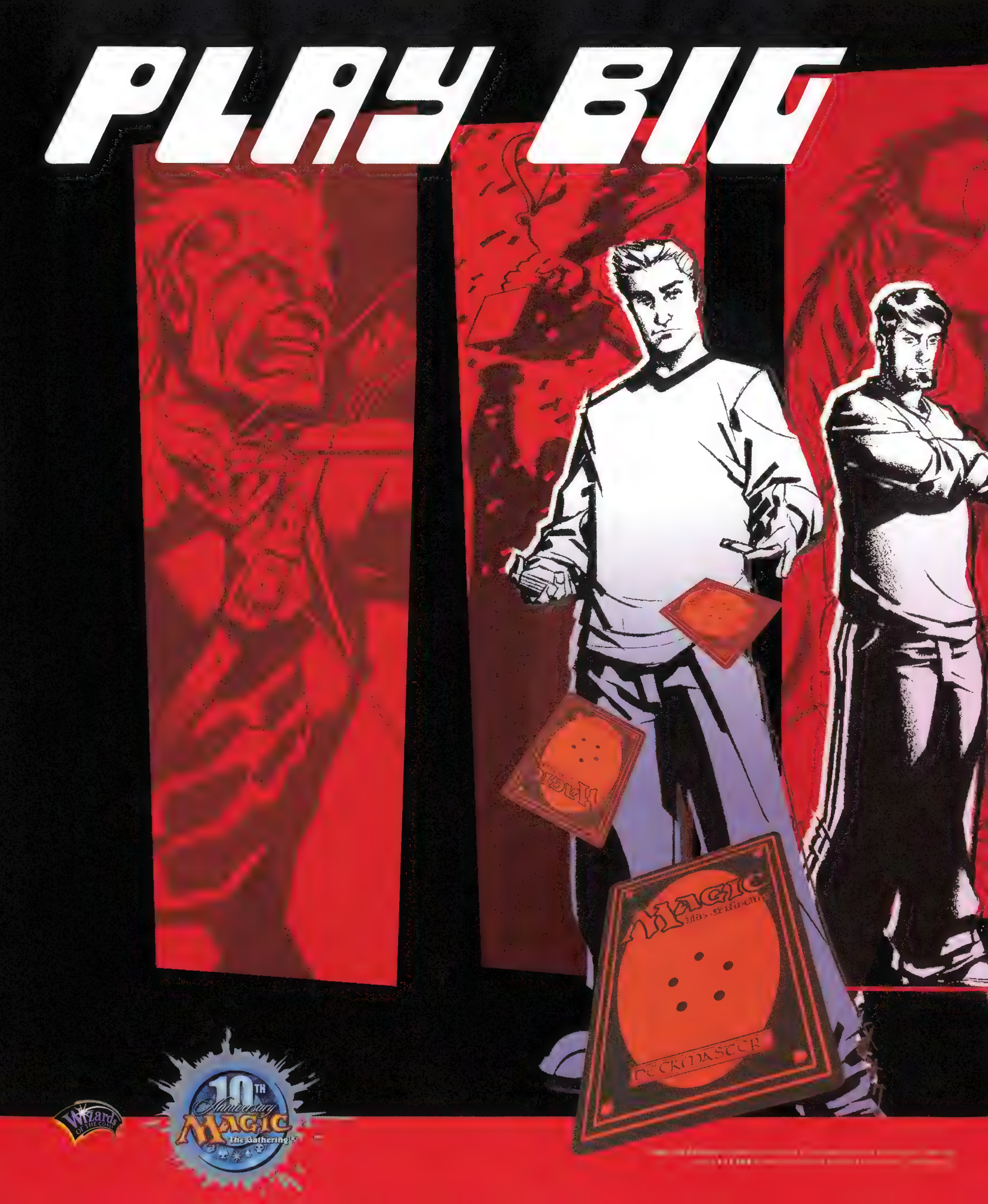
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play games

Art: Castlevania: Rng of Sorrow // Illustrator: Ayami Kojima

The creators of Symphony of the Night take us back to the first crack of a Belmont's whip

Castlevania

Lament of Innocence

words dave halverson

system: playstation 2 / **developer:** konami computer entertainment tokyo / **publisher:** konami / **available:** november

+ Restrospective

Turn to page 28 for a look back at the Castlevania legacy

Video game life boils down to a constant search for virtual euphoria, first discovering what it is that rocks your world, and then setting out to rediscover it as often as possible. For many, that feeling has come at the end of a Belmont's whip, playing Castlevania. Four such instances spring initially into my mind. For me, 8-bit Castlevania was a revelation; however, the first time my soul really stirred was with Super Castlevania IV. From there, Dracula X on PC Engine CD and Bloodlines on Genesis had a similar (although not quite as reverent) effect, followed by one of the single most profound moments I've ever experienced playing games: the first time I saw Alucard in Symphony of the Night. That game would change the way I look at 2D forever—serving as a benchmark for all to come—but moreover, it brought a soundtrack into my life that until that day I never imagined could come from a video game. The amalgam of director Koji "Iga" Igarashi and composer Michiru Yamane touched me in places I didn't even know existed. My Castlevania dream ever since has been to recapture that feeling, and Lament of Innocence just may do the trick.

Set in the 11th century, Lament of Innocence is the story of the first Belmont to take up the fight against Dracula. A nobleman set to be engaged to his beloved Sara until she mysteriously disappears, Leon Belmont ventures into a timeless forest after her, from which there is no return. Handed a whip by a strange alchemist, a hero is born, and the Castlevania legend begins anew.

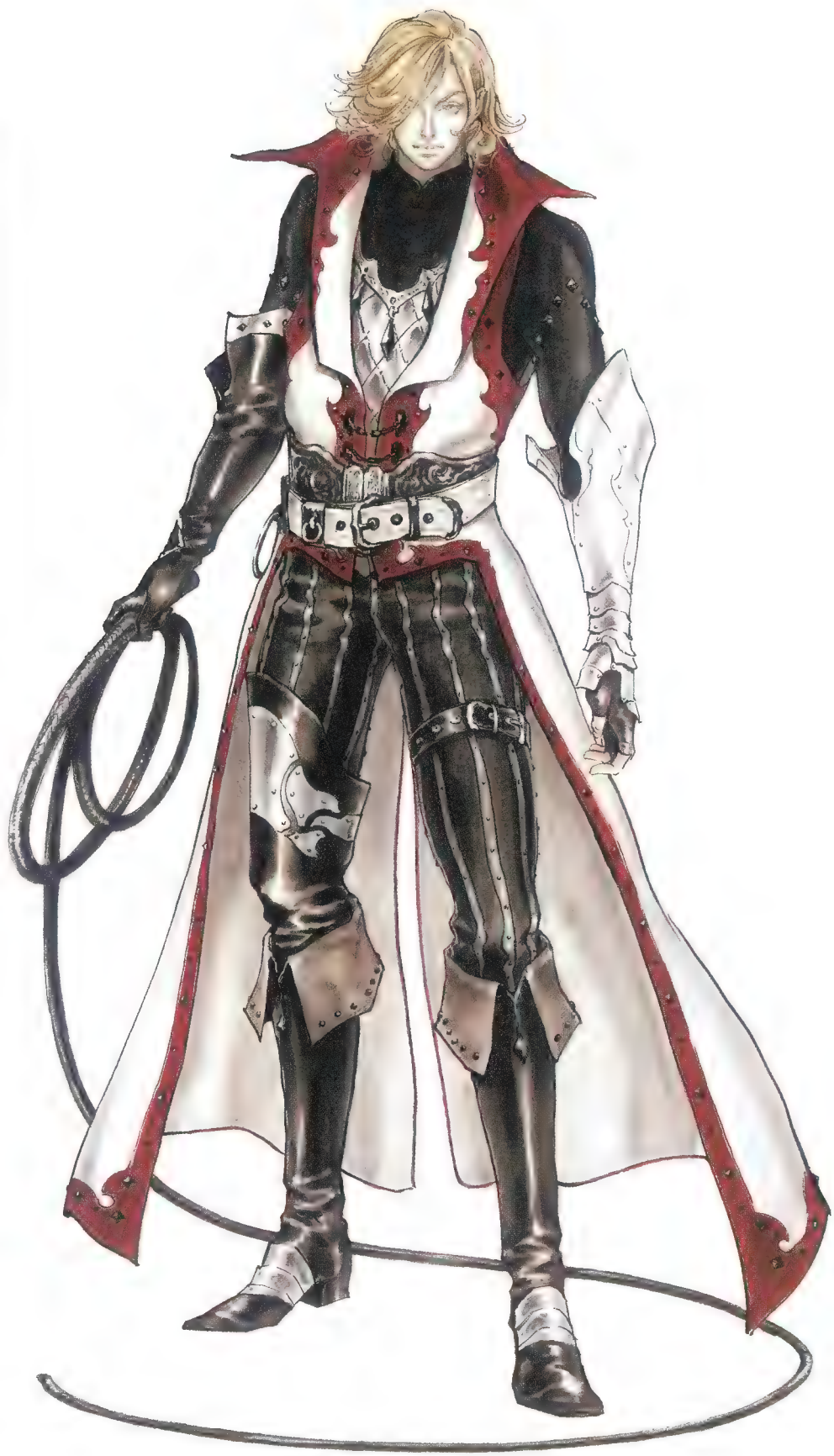
First I must dispense with any E3 fallout by saying that the game really wasn't there; Iga and company merely pieced together a few rooms for people to experience the feel of the game. This is the first report based on actual levels in the game, so clear your mind of any cobwebs regarding Castlevania 64 or the notion that this is in any way a departure from the precedent set by the best the series has ever rendered.

In fact, Lament is very much Symphony of the Night in 3D, drawing parallels at almost every turn. Dracula's lumbering ghouls, hopping mad imps, swamp creatures, winged demons, hell hounds, fire-breathing skulls, armored knights and, of course, skeletal army are all at his service and are all the more wicked. The locales are nearly identical too—a vast network of dank subterranean waterways, cathedrals, gardens, alchemy chambers and breathtaking moonlit panoramas just waiting to swallow you up. More perilous at every turn, Dracula's minions now swarm, leap overhead and fire off projectile attacks. The lagoon creatures spit noxious gasses and flames, headless shimmering knights are as lethal as ever and possess staggering detail as blood drips from their neck holes, and everything skeletal emits the utmost detail and cunning.

But all of this pales in comparison to Lament's bosses. Beyond large room-filling abominations, the main courses—multitiered beasts similar to Symphony's—have come alive to eat your soul. Not since old-school Contra have I experienced such massive ill-tempered behemoths. Iga knows not of the mainstream, only of creating compelling, challenging games within the framework of Gothic horror.

Progression is much like Symphony's as well, although it is not based on acquiring attributes or moves. All five

"...Lament is very much Symphony of the Night in 3D, drawing parallels at almost every turn..."



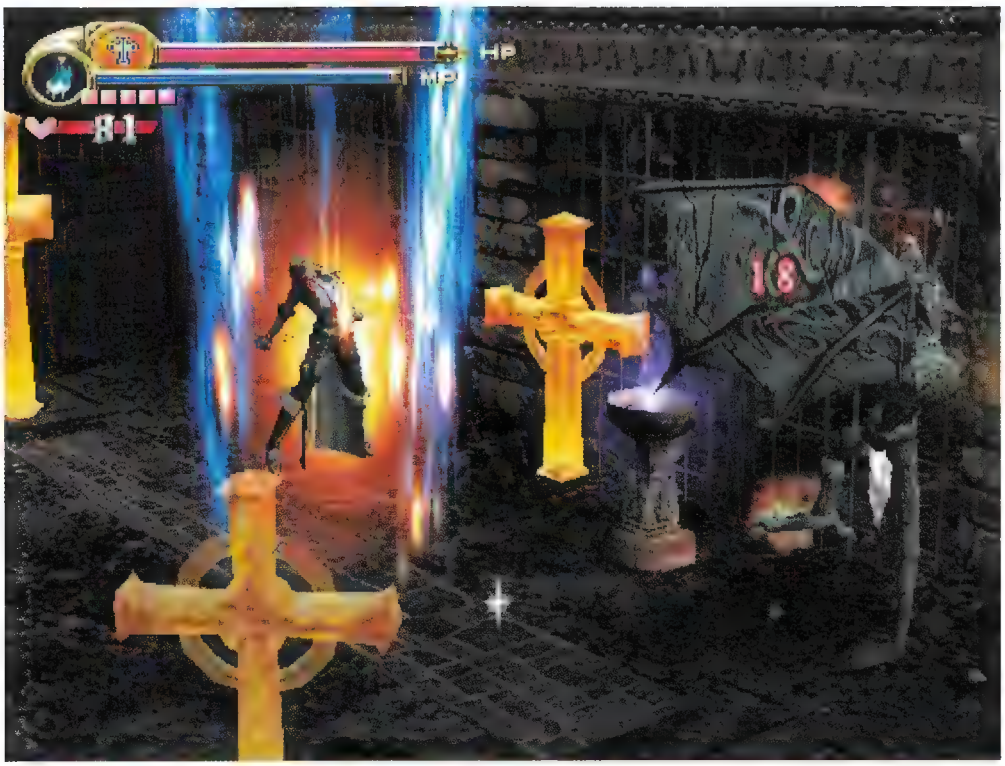
areas on the central hub are available from the outset: Alchemic, Cathedral, Dungeon, Garden and Theater. Progression is based on discovery, activating a series of switches to affect connected pieces of each massive layered environment, essentially working to unlock relics and the boss. You can warp out at any time after partial completion and go chip away somewhere else, returning when you feel more suited to the challenge, or to simply purchase items from the alchemist should you find yourself overcome by the castle's inhabitants. A map similar to Symphony's is also employed, otherwise you could spend hours lost in the game's vastness.

Variety comes by way of Orbs obtained by defeating bosses, which can be combined with relics, found in key locations throughout the castle. Attached to your equipped sub-weapon (axe, holy water, dagger, cross or crystal), the resulting effects are as luminous as they are deadly—good reason to whip every candelabra in sight. Both elements are displayed on circular menus available on the fly, as are the entire item and equipping menus. You can manage everything in Lament while on the move, a brilliant new dimension that keeps the action flowing. Size-wise, it's fairly safe to assume that Lament is at least as big as Symphony: seven spots on the Orb menu hint at seven bosses (so perhaps two hidden areas)…plus Iga himself told us as much at E3.

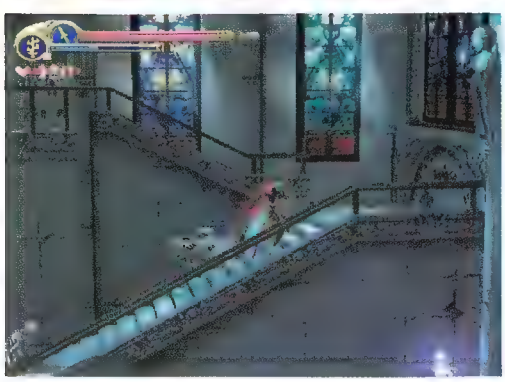
The most nimble Belmont to date, Leon possesses a look closest to Alucard's sophisticated, hauntingly exquisite physique and boasts a similar bevy of moves that take full advantage of the added dimension. Whip attacks both strong and fierce produce wicked ground and air combos; he nimbly straddles high ledges, has four-way evasion maneuvers, can lasso and draw in attackers, block and, for the first time, stiffen his whip to vault over parallel bars. Of course, there's the double jump and a host of special maneuvers to be unlocked throughout the game as well. Ayami Kojima is also, once again, master tailor; Leon's attire is the stuff of Gothic dreams and he is modeled to utter perfection.

During my six hours playing the game for this preview, even though the pieces were not yet linked together in final form, I was astonished to find myself harkening back to that first encounter with Symphony of the Night. I never in my wildest dreams thought Yamane would ever achieve that level of audible bliss again, but she somehow has, just as Iga has found a way to convey the labyrinthine magic of Symphony's 2D into the third dimension. The visuals at work here, from the monster design to the texture work and especially the architecture, are simply magical. While the final determination can only be made after a marathon session with the final game, barricaded from the world for the duration, my gut tells me that yet another profound experience with the Belmont family is at hand.

"The visuals at work here, from the monster design to the texture work and especially the architecture, are simply magical."



Ah, the virtues of 3D. Armour knights were tough enough on a flat plain... multiple axes at twelve clock!



Ayami Kojima

Castlevania Lament of Innocence, Character Designer & Artwork Illustrator

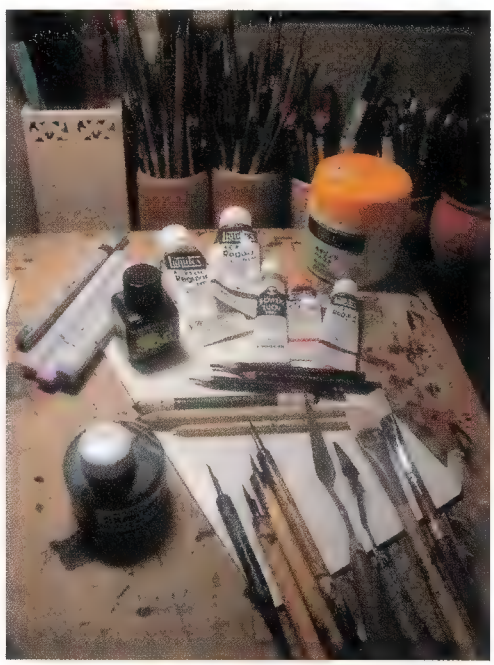
"...I think what I'm providing in the end is a good balance of what I want to show as a part of entertainment and what I want to show from the very bottom of my heart."

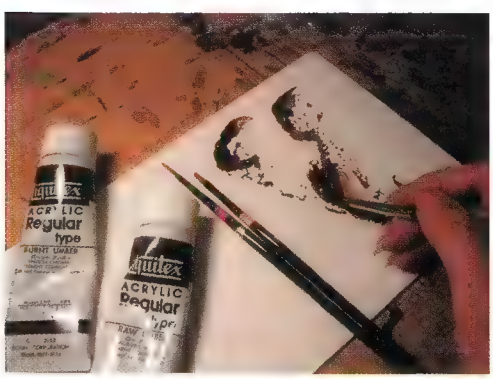
Can you tell us a little bit about your background (such as your hobbies, favorite music, favorite musician, favorite colors, etc.)?
Aside from my work which is really a passion in itself, I enjoy gardening, such as growing plants and trimming leaves. I also like to visit buildings or arts that have some symbolic meaning, such as places like temples and Buddha. I love seeing them and thinking about the background around me to try to come up with what they mean. Not only does the nature around us have meaning, but art has meaning too—it's given birth to our earth through interpretation and by enriching our lives to learn and appreciate the beauty around us. Just like nature changes our environment over time, art changes depending on the style used according to the environment. So, trying to find out the origin of something and how it changed to a certain style or form—or even finding out the origin of a name is very interesting to me.
As for music, I love primitive or tribal music such as African Percussion. When I was young, I loved rock music, but then again, I'm too old to get into rock now [laughs]. I'm more into non-commercial music or sounds, somewhat like a voice of people praying to the heavens. However, I still listen to soundtracks from movies or progressive type of music because it gives me some image for the work I need to design. My heavy rotations are BGM from Jerry Goldsmith, Blue Oyster Cult, Enigma, etc.
As for colors, there are no specific colors that I dislike. But colors I do use often are deep green or red, I suppose. For my original drawings, I try to put in the same color shades and palates. I also love to draw in a style where the color "white" does not stand out. So, normally, I love black and deep green in my work, but my personal color preference, off the record, is the delicious pink!

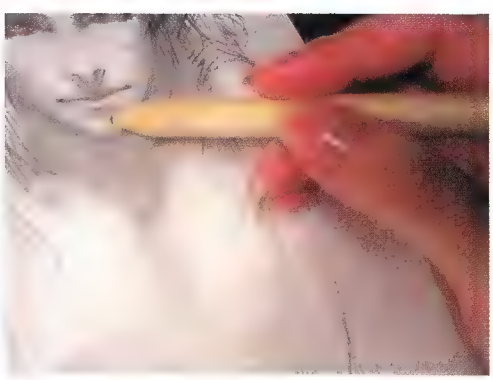
What were you doing before working as a character designer or illustrator?
I was working as an office lady just like other girls did. I always liked to draw, so I actually enjoyed drawing on the private side of my life as a hobby. One time, I was lucky enough to start my artistic career like a part-time job when I received a request to do some illustrations. Never did I think would I do this work as my profession at that time.

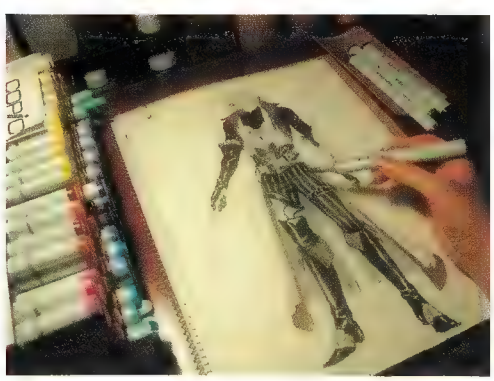
What is your artistic training background? Did you ever go to art school, for example?
Frankly speaking, I did not study art professionally at school. My interest in art as a hobby simply developed as my profession and evolved into what I am today.

In the past, your character designs were incorporated into 2D Castlevania games. This time, your character is in full 3D and on the more graphically powerful PlayStation 2. How do you feel about the new look of the characters?
I was very amazed when I first saw my character was moving in three dimensions. The whip is the main action element of the game and what I feel from the bottom of my heart makes the game so cool and compelling! The highly detailed in-game appearance of the character would not be possible without the great efforts and talents of the









Clockwise from top right: Ayami Kojima // Ayami's working desk and equipment (pencils, pens, pallette knive, etc. // Main character of the game, Leon, in rough color sketch usinc COPIC colored pens // Rubbing pencil // Starting coloring by mixing Liquitex's raw umber and burnt umber

development staff. Also, I knew there would eventually be voice-overs added to each character and now that the team has implemented the sound, my characters are livelier and have their own personalities. It's quite surprising to see my drawings come to life like this and I really appreciate the final results.

Out of curiosity, do you play games? If so, what kind of games do you play?
Actually, I do not play videogames. To be honest, I'm afraid that if I do play games, I'll find myself really into playing the game after all and never be able to put it down [laughs]. So, instead, I'm always watching my friends play games, which is quite fun.

Where do you work on your drawings? Do you have a studio at home?
I'm drawing in a normal room now [sigh]. Having a studio of my own is my dream, but at the same time, I'm soooo scared to find myself absorbed in my work if I do that.

Your art always gives us a very mystic and illusionary atmosphere with a strange attraction. What kind of art/artist influenced your style?
It's really hard to specify who influenced my art style, but I am always trying to watch things/objects carefully and see these things from various perspectives and interests. I'm always influenced by many people and many things—the world around us I guess. Sorry, I cannot narrow down to a specific person or style. Everything in my life that is interesting to me influences my design, art standard, ability to express character from his/her emotion in the story, character movement, and color decorations, etc.
Also, in terms of my career, I don't really know if these influenced my career, but I often receive requests to draw the cover artwork of Japanese mystery novels, some Japanese historical non-fiction, and some fantasy-based storybooks. Specifically, Mr. Hideyuki Kikuchi* has given me a lot of opportunity so far.

When do you come up with an idea? And, if you're stuck, then, what do you do to refresh yourself?
There are many ways I come up with ideas. For example, there are times when an idea flashes in my mind all of sudden or when I pull something out from my drawer (my experience or stock of ideas). There are times where I get a new idea while I'm tweaking compositions or format designs. When I'm drawing an artwork from a story, I try to understand what I should depict in the artwork and then judge whether this idea is understandable from a third person. Sometimes, I'm not sure what the drawing will be exactly in the end. Do you say this is the art of being an artist (sweating)?
To be honest, there are very few times when I find myself heavily stuck. If that does happen, I will try to observe things or focus on objects that might refresh my mind. If I am still having trouble after this process and cannot come up with anything interesting, I will try to take a bath in a big bath tub or I might visit somewhere you can feel the nature. Something like an old traditional building or seeing the sites without having to think sounds nice (laughs).

Every one of your character designs is very beautiful and unique. We noticed that your characters have a neutral gender appearance, especially with the male character designs. Was this a stylistic choice or based on any preferences from your real-life?
You say neutral…hmmm. I wish I could draw more aggressively to express wrinkles or lines or someone with a clear and firm built frame. In other words, I would like to draw someone who is "stained" beautifully—meaning someone who is beautiful but you can visually tell something has happened to them (i.e. age, emotional distress, etc.).
When it comes to my work on fantasy character designs, the ages or gender really does not matter and the character looks as-is. So, in a good and bad sense, these characters look a lot like angels or fairies.
In real-life? I do not really focus too much on appearance, but maybe someone who's got an atmosphere. For example, a guy who's very charming with eye gaze, but somewhat menace mannered in terms of looks and behavior.

Now that the game is in full 3D and the storyline is a prequel set in the 11th century, were there any challenges or difficulties you faced with the Lament of Innocence character designs?
I had to draw from my imagination based on three dimensional and character movement in mind. It was pretty tough to achieve and visualize character designs for a 3D game compared to the previous designs for the 2D Castlevania games. For example, minute details such as costumes and hair style must really be focused on to insure that the design fits in a 3D modeled design.
Throughout working on this series, one of the things I always keep in mind is to push the exciting game experience and deep themed story while not forgetting the game's roots as a horror-based romance from the Dracula series.
Since this game's story is set in the 11th century, it was difficult to match up the costumes and accessories based on historical data from that era. If I had tried to be faithful with 11th-century fashion and weapons, the characters would not look interesting enough to preserve the fantasy atmosphere. Although you may find this to be an inconsistency, it was also necessary to provide variety and match the visuals from the game. This was especially tough this time around. Basically, I was challenged not to lose the perceptions and mythos of the past Castlevania world, but at the same time, draw a line from its past and make something different. It was very difficult.

There are a quite a lot of fans of your artwork outside of Japan. Do you have anything you want to say to them?
Well, I spent a couple of years outside of Japan when I was a child. This experience has influenced me a lot to learn various cultures, spirits, and environments. I wasn't sure if I had been inspiring or getting people to reflect on my art style, because I think I'm still in the learning stage. However, I would like to draw good illustrations by keeping up my Japanese spirit while combining the experiences and influences I gained in other parts of the world. Both perspectives will go into my drawings and I'd like to thank all of my fans for loving and enjoying my art.

You've been working on Castlevania artwork and illustrations for several years now. Did you find that Castlevania projects influenced you as an artist (or perhaps personally)? For example, did some vision or style change because of the Castlevania projects?
As I mentioned earlier, I did some horror romance themed projects before Castlevania. But it looks like people are now looking at me as a specialist of that art style now (laughs). I love the concept of Castlevania/Dracula and I assume I'm quite good at drawing horror romance, which is very thankful. I really do appreciate that I'm a part of the Castlevania series of games and I love that since Castlevania is a videogame, the drawings must show action, strength and airy. I've always wanted to add movement to my drawings and Castlevania projects let me achieve this. I'm very happy about that.

Is there anything you haven't achieved with Castlevania?
Hmmm. I want to draw some dangerous and scary visuals, but that would not happen because I must consider that my drawings will be used in various places and for various purposes (i.e. main visual, posters, box design, advertisement, etc.). I'm pretty much suppressing my naughty feelings when working on Castlevania projects. However, I think what I'm providing in the end is a good balance of what I want to show as a part of entertainment and what I want to show from the very bottom of my heart.

Do you have any final words to all the Castlevania fans out there?
Castlevania is now in full 3D with Castlevania Lament of Innocence! Please look forward to the exceptional music and dynamic sounds of the game, the beautiful backgrounds, character motions, and camera angles, and the sophisticated main character (and first Belmont) Leon Belmont using the illustrious whip as his weapon. Be ready to feel the strongest movement ever.

Turn the page...
Castlevania
A Retrospective 1986-03

Art: Castlevania: Symphony of the Night // **Illustrator:** Ayami Kojima

Castlevania
A Retrospective 1986-03

words chris hoffman and brady fiechter

Born of ancient legends, the journey into the heart of Dracula's castle began many moons ago. Terrifying locales, forbidden horrors, unlimited challenges...this is the world of Castlevania.

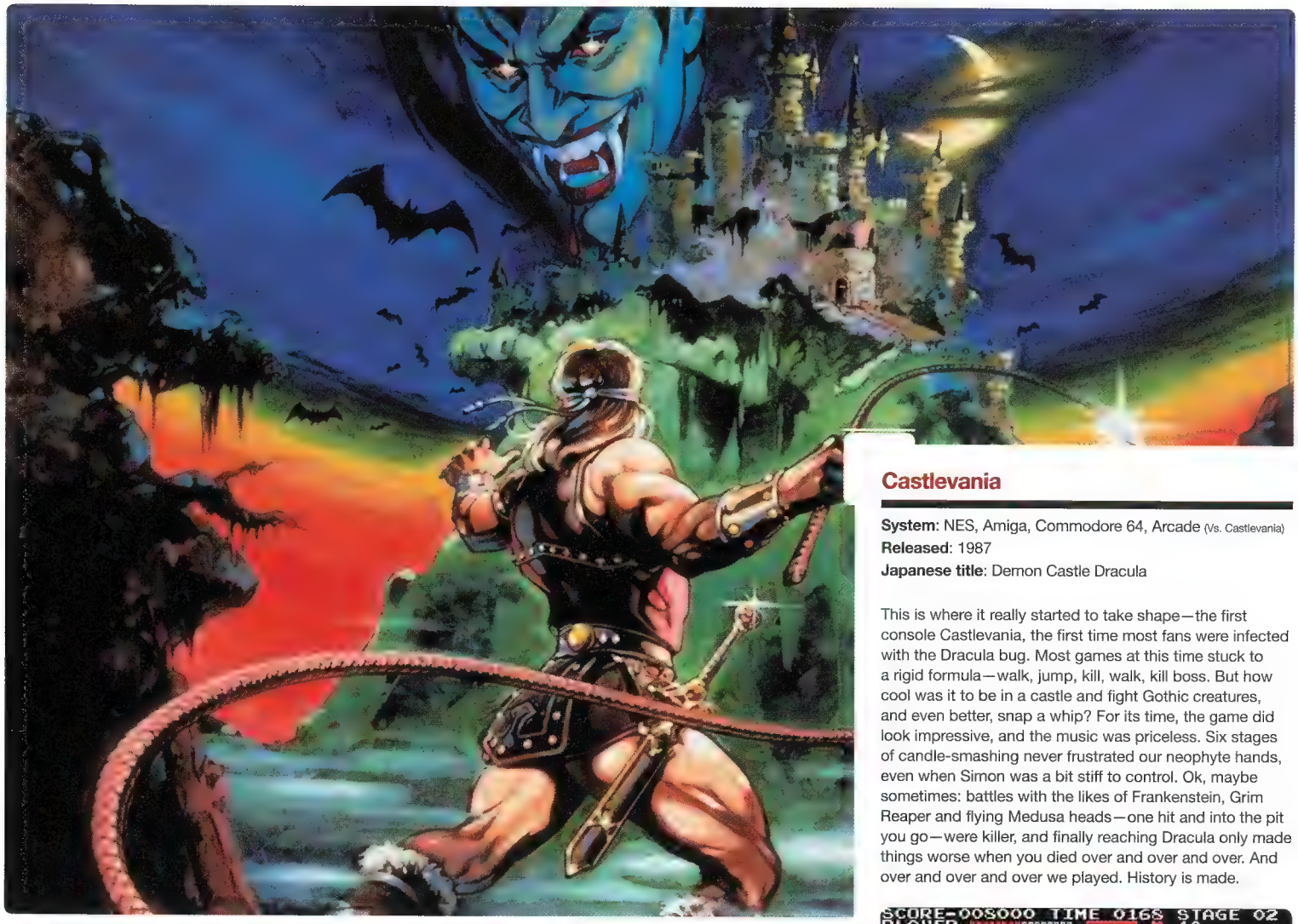
Is Castlevania the greatest video-game series ever? If you've been playing games for a while now, you probably know more than a few hardcore friends who would answer with a resounding "yes." Part of the pleasure of gaming is holding those passionate moments close to the heart, recalling scenes that stick forever, and few series can claim this richness of impact like a Castlevania. The Castlevania lifeblood has been pumping for more than 17 years. It's a classic series, an iconic voice in gaming that speaks as forcefully as ever, and countless gamers add to that voice with a remarkable passion.

play is an obviously staunch part of the Belmont circle. When we decided to crawl deep within the caverns of Lament of Innocence, there was no avoiding the inevitable desire to travel back down the path to where it all began. And what a storied adventure it is! More than 19 games have built the series to what it is today. Some have been masterpieces. Some have been spectacular. Yeah, even a few have been...well, not so spectacular. When you look at the collection as a whole, is there really any denying just how grand the Castlevania heritage really is?

We all have our reasons for loving the ongoing quest to slay Dracula, pretending time and time again we have the secret to skillfully handling Medusa heads and falling the Grim Reaper without an ounce of sweat dripping from the brow. Maybe it's the atmosphere of decadent Gothic settings—how can you be immune to the appeal of exploring an enormous castle?—or the endless fun of snapping a whip at bone-tossing skeletons and ballroom-dancing ghosts. Maybe some of the best music in games is a big part of the appeal. Or maybe the classic sensibilities of the gameplay, combined with so much visual strength and universally loved themes, just can't be matched.

If you go way back to the source, it can be amusing to see just how crude the seeds of birth actually were. But if you were there like us, the memories don't lie: the castle was alive, the music symphonic, the mood elegant and commanding, the determination of Simon Belmont heroic. A classic was born. Enjoy the look back at one of gaming's most accomplished and respected series...

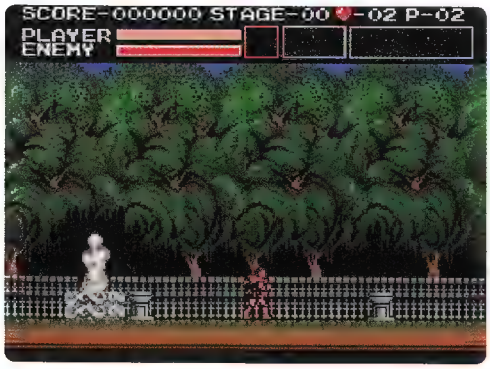
Start here...

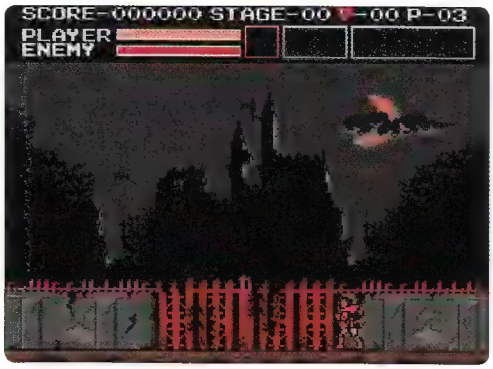


Vampire Killer

System: MSX (Japan and Europe)
Released: 1986
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula

It is here that the seeds of Castlevania were sown...and chances are, you've never played it. The very first outing into Dracula's haunted castle—only released on the MSX personal computer and never available in North America—was significantly different from the Castlevania we came to know and love (and fear). Instead of all-out action, Vampire Killer had a bit more of an adventurous puzzle element to it; players were required to seek out keys before they could proceed through the castle, and merchants were available to buy power-ups. Nonetheless, the classic Gothic aesthetic was born here, as was the whip-wielding Simon Belmont and the infamous Castlevania challenge.

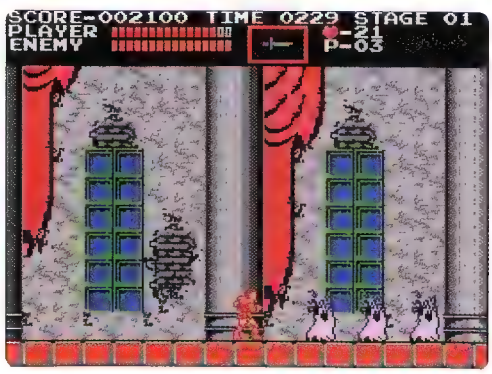




Castlevania

System: NES, Amiga, Commodore 64, Arcade (Vs. Castlevania)
Released: 1987
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula

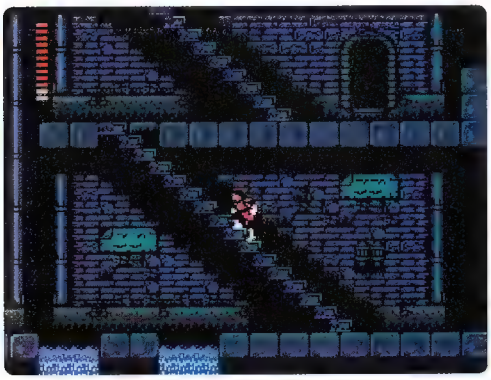
This is where it really started to take shape—the first console Castlevania, the first time most fans were infected with the Dracula bug. Most games at this time stuck to a rigid formula—walk, jump, kill, walk, kill boss. But how cool was it to be in a castle and fight Gothic creatures, and even better, snap a whip? For its time, the game did look impressive, and the music was priceless. Six stages of candle-smashing never frustrated our neophyte hands, even when Simon was a bit stiff to control. Ok, maybe sometimes: battles with the likes of Frankenstein, Grim Reaper and flying Medusa heads—one hit and into the pit you go—were killer, and finally reaching Dracula only made things worse when you died over and over and over. And over and over and over we played. History is made.

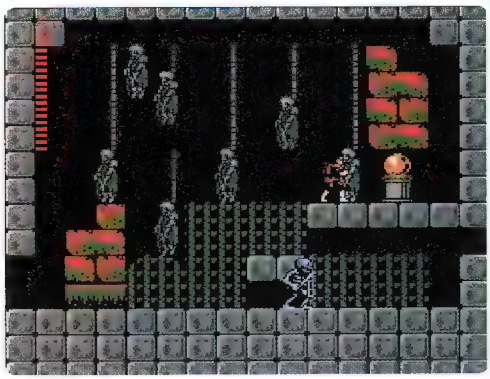


Castlevania II: Simon's Quest

System: NES
Released: 1988
Japanese title: Dracula II: The Accursed Seal

Simon slew the Count in his previous adventure, which turned out to infect the land with a horrible plague. Drac's body parts were scattered across an RPG-like setting, and to break the curse on the land and himself, Simon had to do some hunting and burn the remains. There really weren't levels in Castlevania II; you could roam the swamps, forests and towns at will, and any time you died, you'd come back right where you left off. This was a drastic departure from the previous games, and despite its downfalls, there were some interesting innovations, like the change from day to night. Its greatest gift would turn out to be the inspiration for Symphony of the Night.

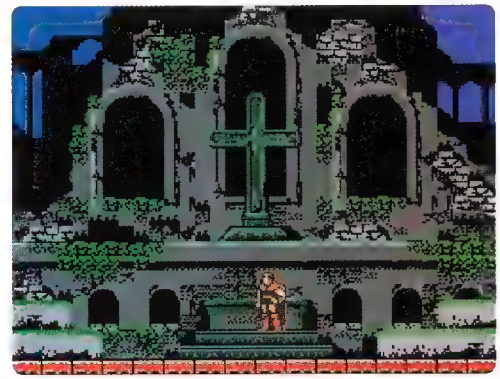




Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse

System: NES
Released: 1990
Japanese title: Legend of Demon Castle

Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse went back to the original formula, focusing on individual levels and action gameplay. Graphically, Dracula's Curse did things previously unimaginable with the NES, taking players through clock towers, mad forests and a ghastly pirate ship. One of the coolest additions was branching paths, making the game extremely replayable. Also new was the lead hunter, Trevor Belmont, one of Simon's ancestors. Assisting Trevor were allies he could meet up with along the way, including a thief, Grant DaNasty, and Sypha Belnades, a magician. This is also where Alucard, the hero in Symphony of the Night and Dracula's son, is first introduced.



Medusa Heads

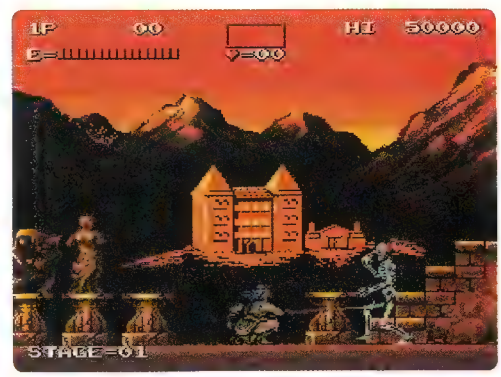
Brilliant or sadistic?

Either someone at Konami had a design epiphany while studying wave amplitudes in math class or was just plain sadistic, but whatever the reason behind the invention of the iconic Medusa heads, their presence in every Castlevania from the start has proven a devilish confrontation. These flying enemies always exhibited the same simplistically brilliant patterns, knocking us off ledges and dealing damage at the most inopportune times. Yet another classic Castlevania moment.

Haunted Castle

System: Arcade
Released: 1988
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula

No candles to whip? It's the enemies who drop the hearts? As the only original Castlevania arcade title, I guess it's OK to take a little liberty. Some disregard this as a proper 'Vania, and it's rare to find anyone who has even played it. Still, the hardest of the hardcore can find more than enough good to point to. The gameplay structure was familiar Castlevania, but getting very far proved frustrating with only one life and three continues. As usual, the music was excellent, and even a couple tunes popped up in future Castlevania games.



Konami Collector's Series

Castlevania & Contra

So, you're in the mood for some classic Castlevania action but don't want to take the old NES out of storage? Then just turn on your PC and pick up a copy of Konami Collector's Series: Castlevania and Contra. The compilation features the original versions of Castlevania, Simon's Quest and Dracula's Curse, along with Contra and Super C. Sadly, there are no bonuses or enhancements, but it gets the job done.

Super Castlevania IV

System: SNES
Released: 1991
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula

A good number of fans acknowledge Super Castlevania IV as one of the best in the series. It returns Simon Belmont to the hunt for Dracula, maintaining a lot of the elements that defined the original. Of course, this was the first Castlevania to appear on the new, advanced SNES hardware, allowing artists much more freedom in creating an infinitely more appealing look to the Gothic visions. The gameplay was linear, moving from the castle outskirts and dripping caves to dungeons and haunted libraries.

Simon still used his whip as the primary source for destruction, but now he could swing and latch on to some objects, or use the whip as a flail. The use of Mode 7, the SNES' advanced scrolling and scaling chipset, gave some of the levels an awesome visual kick: the swinging chandeliers and rotating rooms never failed to impress. Putting the SNES' superior sound chip to fine use, the music was, like almost every game in the series, an especial standout. Some of the tunes still stick in our heads, but perhaps even more impressive was the use of echo effects in the caves and other crisp effects that were breathtakingly new for the time.

Even today, the game packs charm and big appeal, never failing to challenge and entertain through countless plays. Credit a huge part of this to just how fastidiously designed every aspect of the game was; there's good reason why so many people regard Super Castlevania IV so highly. Hail to the first Castlevania that allowed you to whip in eight directions!

interview

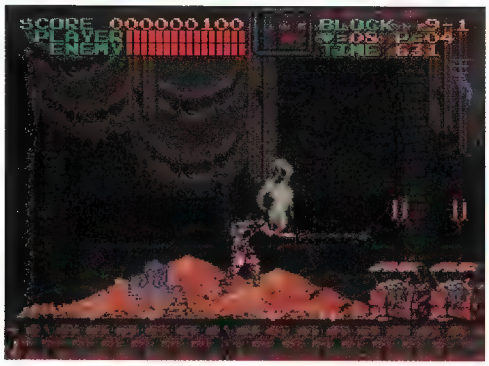
Mitch Ueno

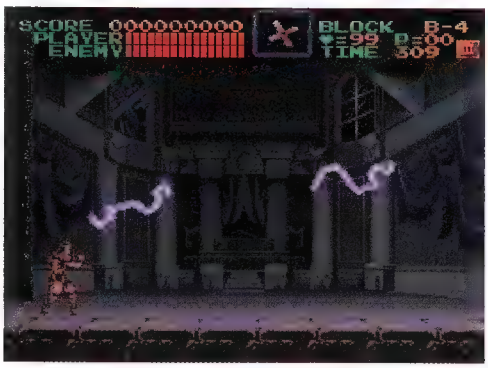
a.k.a. Jun Furano

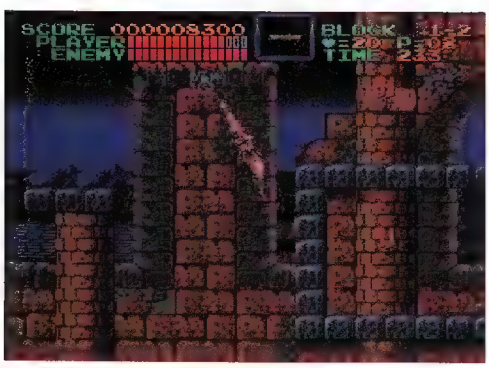
Team Leader and Lead Programmer for Super Castlevania IV

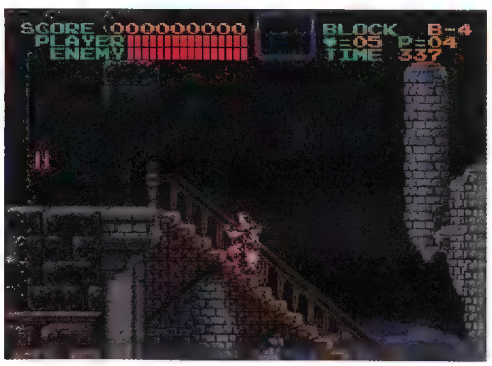
Additional Highlights: Team leader for Axelay and Contra III
Currently: Senior Vice President Product Development, Konami Computer Entertainment Hawaii, Inc.

"My favorite is the whip. That is the greatest thing we could implement. The music is also my favorite part of the game."









play: What kind of approach did you guys take to making Super Castlevania IV, a sequel to one of the biggest gaming series of the time?
Mitch Ueno: When we started the Castlevania IV project, we tried to reproduce the joy and atmosphere of the original Castlevania. The RPG element of Simon's Quest was good, but we wanted to make a pure action game.

What were some of the biggest hurdles you faced on the project?
The biggest one was probably the graphical improvement of the game. At that time, most people thought SNES could do anything! So meeting those expectations was a big challenge because SNES is not that powerful. But Mode 7 really helped us to make something good-looking. Another big hurdle was technical challenges. When we started this project, SNES development kits were not available. We only had documents at that time, so we used NES to make the prototype. After a while, we received beta development kits but those were somewhat buggy.

Any cool stories that came about during the development process?
This may not be a cool story for you guys, but I decided to get married at that time. My wife was the lead artist of this game. She is listed on the credits screen as "Nyankun Hara." This is common among Japanese game developers, maybe because they have no time to find somebody outside the company!

Castlevania has always been a beloved series, so did you find any kind of pressure making IV?
Yes. There was pressure from marketing, especially from the US. They wanted to ship this game as early as possible. Also, expectations were really high for the game content. There was also pressure from the studio in Kobe. The original Castlevania was developed by the studio in Kobe and we were working at the studio in Tokyo. At that time, HQ was in Kobe and Tokyo was kind of a satellite studio. I was a bit afraid of getting complaints from the original Castlevania team.

What were some of your favorite parts of the game?
My favorite is the whip. That is the greatest thing we could implement. We had a good programmer on our team (he is listed as Yaipon, I think) and without him, we could not have the whip.
The music is also my favorite part of the game. Our sound team produced really high-quality music. Without that music, it would not have been a true Castlevania title. And of course I like the graphics.

I know we're well beyond the primitive SNES, but what was it like coding for a simple 2D machine—probably just as difficult in different ways as today's games?
I think that coding for SNES was one of the worst experiences. Yes, it is a 2D machine, but it is not that simple. They used this strange and lovely CPU called 65816. This is not a true 16-bit CPU so we had to use both 8-bit and 16-bit code. Also, the memory map was almost like 8-bit, with so many memory banks. Because of this, debugging was pretty difficult. And needless to say, everything is written in Assembly. Because the hardware does not have frame buffer, there is almost no drawing process involved in order to display something. Programmers don't have to worry about how long drawing takes, unlike with current hardware like PS2. So it was difficult in different ways.

What occupies your time today? Still gaming?
When I'm at home, I don't have much time to play games as I have three kids. Also, since I live in Hawaii now, I sometimes go to beach with the family!

Dracula X: The Rondo of Blood

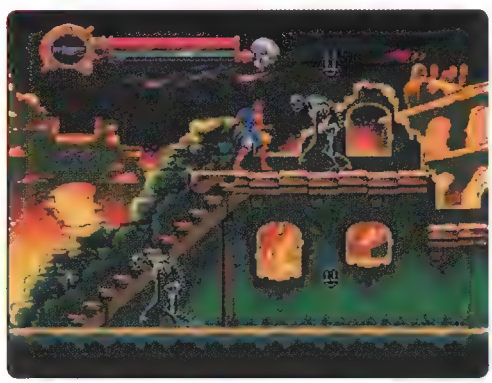
System: PC Engine, Super CD-ROM (Japan only)
Released: 1993

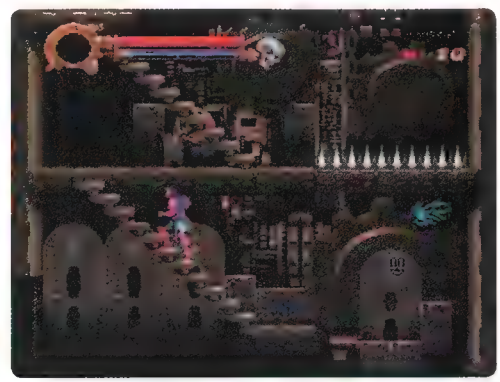
As pure action games go, Dracula X: The Rondo of Blood is arguably at the very top of the Castlevania tier. This is a touchy subject among fans; despite its legendary status, it sadly never made its way across the Pacific in its original form. Thanks to the space afforded by CD-ROM technology, Dracula X boasted awesome sound, incredible animation and detail for the time, and even some anime cutscenes. The game was huge, with a rich variety of gorgeous levels, both original and drawing on Castlevanias past, offering multiple paths and tons of secrets to find. There were even different endings. Richter Belmont played the role of protagonist, but the inclusion of a second playable character, Maria, a little girl who fought the undead with cute animals, was a large part of the appeal. (The very same Maria returned as an adult in Symphony of the Night.) Consider this our plea to Iga for a Castlevania Chronicles version.

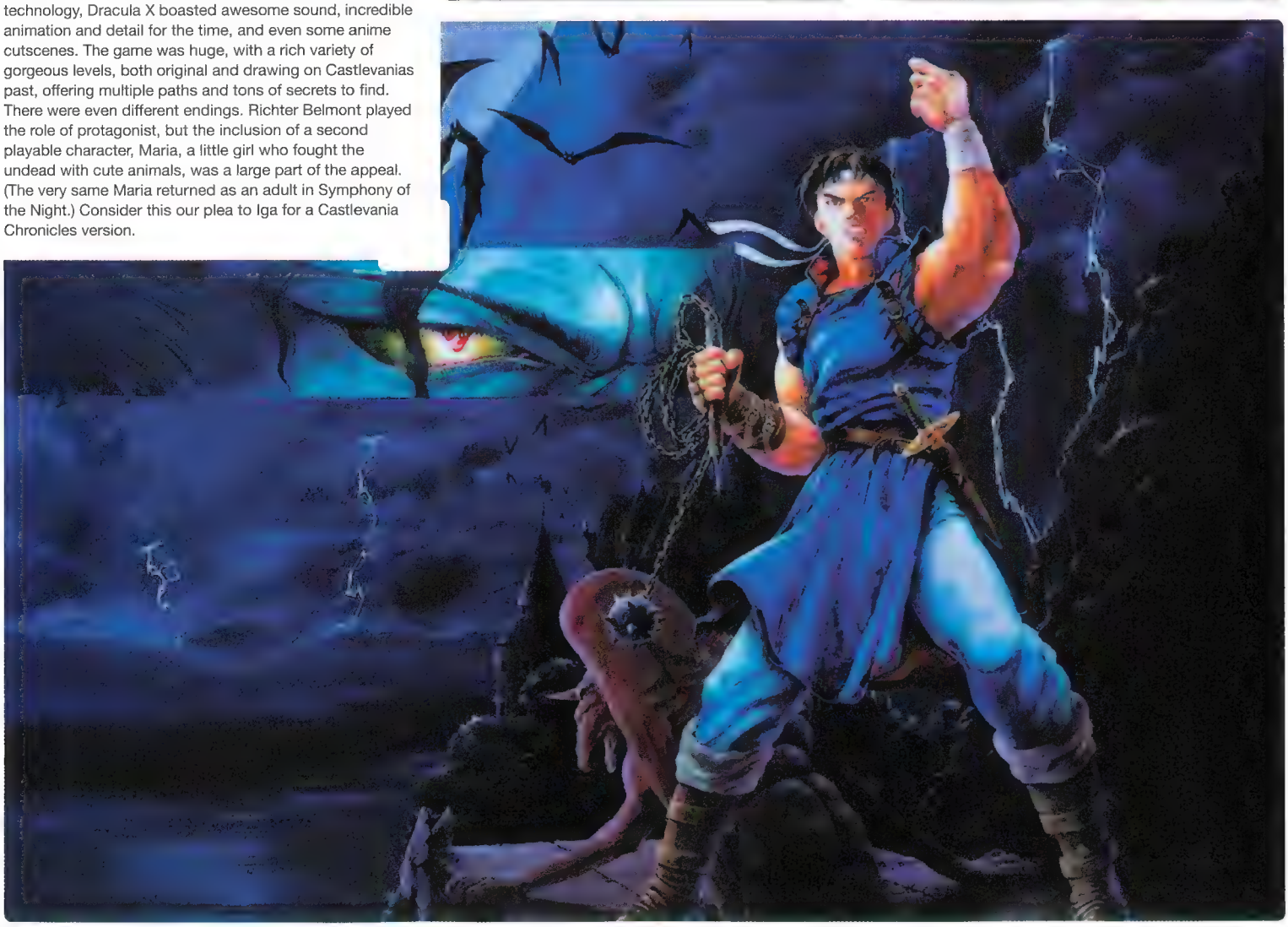
Castlevania: Dracula X

System: SNES
Released: 1995
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula XX

The SNES version of Castlevania: Dracula X often gets a bad rap for not living up to the high standards set by the PC Engine title, but taken on its own, it's actually a remarkably enjoyable title. Pure, direct Castlevania action is once again the name of the game, as Richter Belmont must save his beloved Annet and her sister Maria from the forces of darkness. The levels were completely different from the PC Engine game, but aspects like branching paths and alternate levels were retained, and there were multiple endings depending on secrets discovered. Graphically, the game was a treat, and the music was just as good if not better than the original, CD-based Dracula X. The most common gripe about Dracula X: the lack of a multi-directional whip.







The Castlevania Adventure

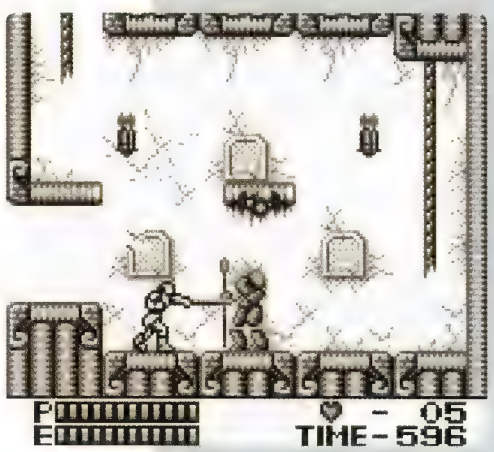
System: Game Boy
Released: 1989
Japanese title: Legend of Dracula

Shortly after the Game Boy came out in 1989, Konami unleashed The Castlevania Adventure. According to the official Japanese timeline, this game, which starred Christopher Belmont as the designated vampire hunter, takes place exactly 100 years after Trevor and his allies vanquished the count in Castlevania III. The gameplay was notably slower than previous Castlevania games, and sub-weapons were gone, but a few new mechanics were added: rope-climbing replaced stairs, allowing for vertically oriented stages, and the whip could now be upgraded to shoot fireballs. A color version of this game was released several years later in the multi-game cartridge Konami Game Boy Collection Vol. 1, but it never made it to the U.S.

Castlevania II: Belmont's Revenge

System: Game Boy
Released: 1991
Japanese title: Legend of Dracula 2

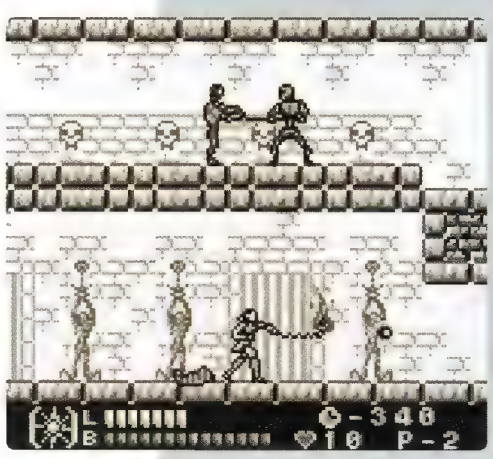
Generally considered the best Castlevania game on the original Game Boy, Castlevania II: Belmont's Revenge picks up 15 years after The Castlevania Adventure. Christopher's son Soleiyu has been enslaved by Dracula, and so Christopher ventures forth once more to save his son and vanquish the Count. While Belmont's Revenge basically played a lot like The Castlevania Adventure, several notable differences made it significantly better: improved graphics, the inclusion of traditional sub-weapons, a password system to take the edge off the difficulty and the ability to select the order of the levels. Like its predecessor, Belmont's Revenge was also re-released in a color edition, this time in Konami Game Boy Collection Vol. 4.



Castlevania Legends

System: Game Boy
Released: 1998
Japanese title: Legend of Dracula: Dark Night Prelude

Castlevania Legends was originally conceived as the origin of the Belmont clan. Sonya Belmont was the game's heroin, born with special abilities after Dracula rose to power as the Prince of Darkness. Now that Lament Of Innocence is retroactively telling the link between the Belmonts and Dracula, it would be easy to chalk up Legends as apocrypha, but when asked, Konami representatives winked and informed us that Legends does tell the origin…of the first female vampire hunter. Despite being released several years after the previous Game Boy Castlevania game, Legends couldn't improve much upon Belmont's Revenge, though additions like magic powers earned by defeating bosses and multiple endings were made.

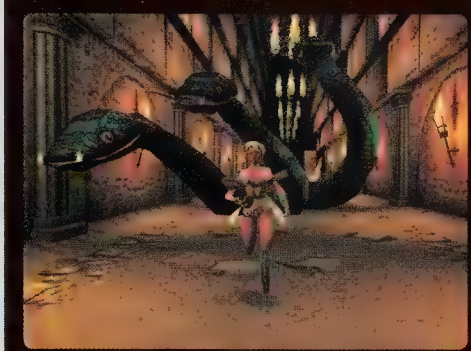


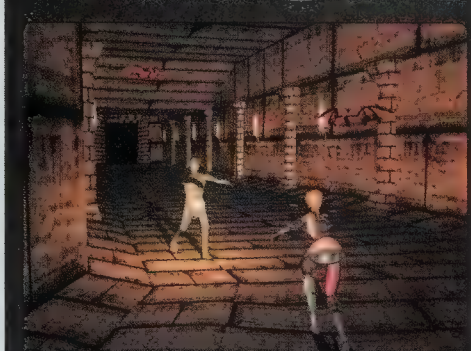
The Lost Castlevania

Castlevania: Resurrection

System: Dreamcast
Released: NA

Castlevania: Resurrection remains a silent mystery, development apparently halting around spring of 2000. Originally intended as a launch game for the Dreamcast, with Castlevania Legends' Sonia Belmont in the starring role, the game was crippled by delays and was rumored to cause a lot of internal controversy. One vocal question among the press and fans: developed in America? Fully 3D and action-oriented, the game will only be remembered by its screenshots.





Castlevania Timeline

This timeline is based on information from a variety of official sources, including the most recent information from Konami and from game manuals. Due to differences in Japanese and English documents for the Castlevania series, discrepancies between dates may occur. Some games, like NES Castlevania and Vampire Killer, are a re-telling of the same story.

10xx

Hero: Leon Belmont
Game: Castlevania: Lament of Innocence

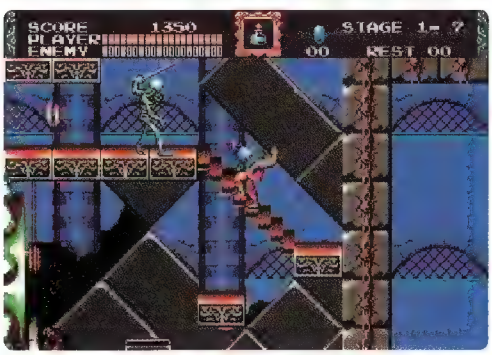
1450

Hero: Sonia Belmont
Game: Castlevania Legends, Castlevania: Resurrection

Castlevania: Bloodlines

System: Genesis
Released: 1994
Japanese title: Vampire Killer

The horror was more prevalent than ever in Castlevania: Bloodlines. Blood dripped from dismembered, decorative corpses; slain foes died in grisly fashion; fountains even flowed with blood. With an early 1900s setting, one stage even took place in Germany, the undead manning a munitions factory—an eerie metaphor to be sure. For all the added creepiness, Bloodlines was still simply a great Genesis game. Playing as either Belmont descendant John Morris (with traditional whip) or as Eric Lecarde (armed with a spear), players were in for six levels of action through the haunted European countryside, attempting to stop Countess Bartley from resurrecting Dracula, her uncle. While the Genesis couldn't wow us with technological magic like the Super NES could, it still pushed the hardware to its max with amazing, multi-segmented bosses and devious tricks, like inverted rooms, that toyed with our perceptions.



Art: Castlevania Chronicles // **Illustrator**: Ayami Kojima

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

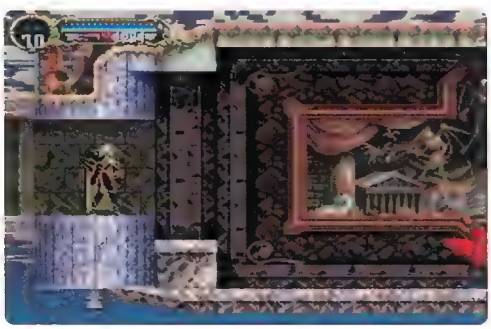
System: PlayStation
Released: 1997
Japanese title: Dracula X: Nocturne in the Moonlight

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night is the overwhelming choice for finest in the series. More than being obsessively cherished and torn apart by countless Castlevania fanatics, it is not rare to see it sitting at the top of the best game of all time lists. It's such an achievement on so many levels that it towers above its predecessors; as much as we love this series, as much as it has meant to us in our gaming lives, such resonating praise for Symphony of the Night truly speaks volumes to the way we look at this game.

Not one single component stands out as the biggest reason why Symphony of the Night holds such enormous respect. The foundation was inspired by Nintendo's masterpiece series, Metroid, with a newfound emphasis on adventure and exploration. The castle was set up as an interconnected gateway of one amazing room after another, where Alucard, Dracula's son, would travel through several times in the adventure. An array of power-ups and special items had to be discovered to open certain areas, which then revealed even more branches. When the word "backtracking" comes into play in video games, it's easy to bristle, but here the design was so brilliantly executed that you enjoyed the constant discovery, finding the castle to be a convincing world that pulled you in with compelling force.

Part of the thrill was controlling Alucard, who was gorgeously animated and supple to the touch—something quite new to Castlevania. Equal attention to detail was paid to the enormous squad of Dracula's minions, each possessing some distinct marking that excited us upon every confrontation. When a boss was finally revealed, there was a feeling of awe and intrigue. To this day, it's rare to find such magnificence in design.

Castlevania had always contained a certain amount of collecting and item use, but Symphony of the Night took



Timeline continued

1698

Hero: Simon Belmont
Game: Castlevania II: Simon's Quest

1698

Hero: Simon Belmont
Game: Super Castlevania IV

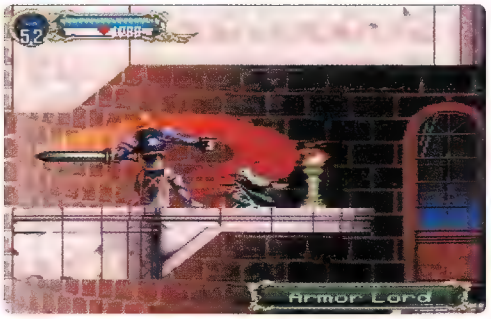
1748

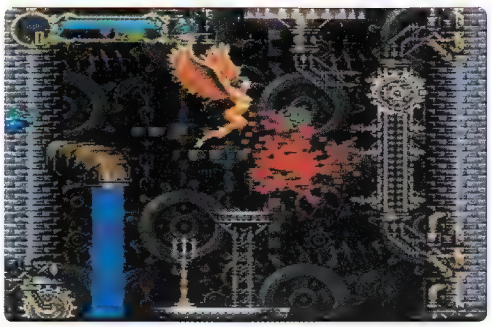
Hero: Juste Belmont
Game: Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance

1792

Hero: Richter Belmont
Game: Dracula X (PC Engine), Castlevania: Dracula X (SNES)

Art: Castlevania: Symphony of the Night // **Illustrator**: Ayami Kojima





it to a new level. Also a big departure was Alucard's use of a sword as his main method of attack. Add to this an experience-point system and equipment management and you get an example of how to truly take a series and inject wild invention; this was a sequel to end all sequels.

Anyone who has played Symphony of the Night knows that there is one more component that must be mentioned every time the game is discussed: music. There are few, if any, games that have left such a mark with their musical composition. When you think of a level in Symphony, you think of the sounds floating through the halls that took the atmosphere to a heavenly realm. You didn't play Symphony of the Night, you inhabited its fantasy.

Symphonic Remix

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

System: Sega Saturn
Released: 1998
Japanese title: Dracula X: Nocturne in the Moonlight

Following the breathtaking beauty of Symphony of the Night on PlayStation was a Saturn version exclusive to Japan. The Saturn port was essentially the same game, but it added a few new areas, new items, new characters and classic Castlevania tunes. Maria was now playable, complete with grown-up versions of her animal attacks from Dracula X. Despite the additions, they added little to the experience; the graphics suffered and Alucard's wolf form forgot how to swim. The Saturn version was still a great game but ultimately disappointed. Also planned was a Symphony port for Tiger's Game.com portable. It looked great but handled poorly when last shown, and was canceled as the Game.com expired.

1797
Hero: Alucard
Game: Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

1830
Hero: Nathan Graves
Game: Castlevania: Circle of the Moon

1844
Hero: Cornell
Game: Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness

1852
Hero: Reinhardt Schneider
Game: Castlevania (N64)

Castlevania (N64)

System: Nintendo 64
Released: 1999
Japanese title: Dracula Apocalypse

We don't want to be too hard on this forgettable first attempt at taking the Castlevania glory into 3D, because it wasn't a complete disaster—just a disappointment given what came before. Outside of the usual Gothic underpinnings and hero Reinhardt's poor fashion sense, not much about the game felt far removed from every other average action-adventure during the time. A little platforming, a little puzzle solving, a lot of running and dodging and attacking. One of the biggest problems was dealing with deadened controls and sluggish, awkward character movement that couldn't be forgiven within the 3D world, plus a particular bomb-carrying sequence undoubtedly resulted in many broken controllers the world over.

Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness

System: Nintendo 64
Released: 1999
Japanese title: Dracula Apocalypse Gaiden: The Legend of Cornell

Following hot on the heels of the first N64 Castlevania came this pseudo-sequel starring the werewolf called Cornell on a mission to rescue his sister from Dracula. More of a special edition than anything else, the game recycled the graphics and many levels from its predecessor, but also actually fixed a lot of the inherent problems, adding in better music and more enjoyable new stages. Three other playable characters, including Reinhardt and Carrie from the first N64 Castlevania game, were also included. Still, it was far from perfect and made many a gamer all the more bitter about Castlevania's lackluster 3D exploits, especially with two games in one year.

Castlevania Chronicles

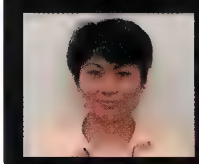
System: X68000, PSOne
Released: 1993, 2001
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula, Castlevania Chronicle

Originally released in Japan for the X68000 computer in 1993, this version of Castlevania is an enhanced retelling of Simon's first battle against Dracula with improved graphics and music, a multi-directional whip and redesigned levels, which jumped in count from six to eight. Without a U.S. release, the X68000 game was destined to be a highly sought rarity until Konami ported it to the PlayStation in 2001 as Castlevania Chronicles. The PS version included both the original X68000 version and an Arrange Mode, featuring remixed music, a difficulty select and some minor changes to the character sprites. The U.S. version even had an exclusive art gallery and interview.

Hallowed harmonies

Castlevania Soundtracks

Many factors have contributed to Castlevania's longevity, among them the action, the Gothic atmosphere and most certainly the music. From the technologically simple but brilliantly catchy tunes on the NES up to Michiru Yamane's beautiful, classical orchestration of Symphony of the Night and beyond, the music of Castlevania has been an integral part of the experience. In Japan, this has resulted in many an official Castlevania soundtrack. Many of them are merely the original soundtracks in CD form, such as "Akumajo Dracula Best," containing the soundtracks to Castlevania 1, 2 and 3. Original soundtracks to most of the other games are also available. Arranged soundtracks are offered as well. "Dracula New Classic" is an ideal but rare soundtrack, capturing the flavor of Castlevania with a partially orchestral composition. Strangely, most of the arranged versions have been quite the opposite, but if you're in the mood, the synthesized hair-metal versions of the classic songs can rock in the "Perfect Selection Dracula Battle" CDs. However, one rare Perfect Selection CD features key songs modified with English lyrics; Bloody Tears now echos with "You better not shout, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why! Dracula, Dracula, Dracula is coming to town! Aaie!" Another to avoid is "Dracula X Remixies" (yes, that's how it's spelled), offering Castlevania samples mixed with a generic dance beat. On the positive side, the Dracula X OST and "Akumajo Dracula MIDI Collection" offer both original and arranged tunes, all of excellent quality. Game soundtracks are still rare in the U.S., but one official Castlevania CD has been released. This collection of unmodified tunes from throughout the series was available as a preorder bonus for Castlevania: Symphony of the Night.



Michiru Yamane created the unmatched Symphony of the Night soundtrack.

The rare Dracula Perfect Selection CD...filled with goofy lyrics about Dracula sucking blood and "Simmon" retaliating.

Timeline concluded

1897
Dracula slain by Quincy Morris

1914

Hero: John Morris
Game: Castlevania: Bloodlines

1999
Dracula destroyed in non-specific yet crucial battle

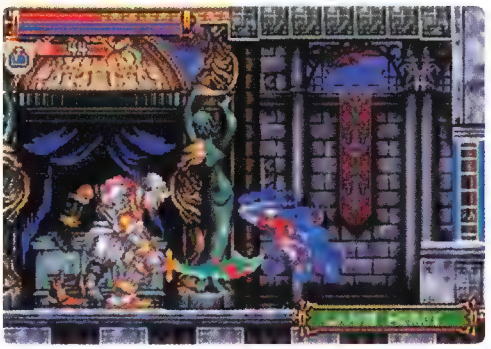
2035

Hero: Soma Cruz
Game: Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow

Castlevania: Circle of the Moon

System: Game Boy Advance
Released: 2001
Japanese title: Demon Castle Dracula: Circle of the Moon

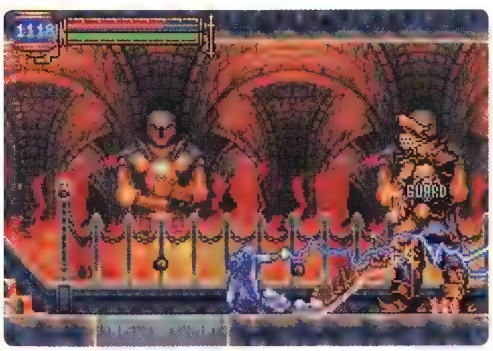
The arrival of Castlevania: Circle of the Moon was a dark and beautiful revelation. Just when Castlevania seemed determined to take the 3D route and we thought gamers would never see a game to rival the incomparable Symphony, from the depths of KCE Kobe emerged COTM, just in time for the GBA's U.S. launch. Though not from Symphony's designers, Circle was obviously heavily influenced by the PlayStation classic, featuring the same type of labyrinthine castle and RPG elements. Special items granted Nathan Graves, the newest vampire hunter, abilities like a wall jump and dash attack, further promoting exploration into the musty catacombs as Nathan attempted to free his mentor from Dracula's clutches. The screen-filling bosses were among the most terrifying and challenging of recent Castlevania games, but an ingenious "DSS" system, which granted 100 abilities by matching various cards acquired by felling enemies, helped even the score. Nathan's adventure took place in 1830.



Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance

System: Game Boy Advance
Released: 2002
Japanese title: Castlevania: Concerto of the Midnight Sun

It seemed impossible. Could it be that little more than a year after Circle of the Moon brought Gothic bliss to handheld gamers everywhere, another Castlevania game was already at hand? It was true. This time, Symphony's key team members were even onboard: Iga produced, backed up by Ayami Kojima on art, and Michiru Yamane even assisted on music. True to form, Harmony of Dissonance was another masterpiece, immersing us yet again in the intertwining passages of Dracula's castle where we would continuously seek the next mystical item that could unlock the path. A visual improvement over Circle, Harmony also featured a new magic system, allowing hero Juste Belmont to fuse elemental spell books with his sub-weapons; strangely, the sound quality and challenge weren't quite up to COTM's levels. However, an unbelievably cool bonus feature allowed players to control the original 8-bit Simon Belmont sprite through the game's Boss Rush mode, complete with a unique ending.



Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow

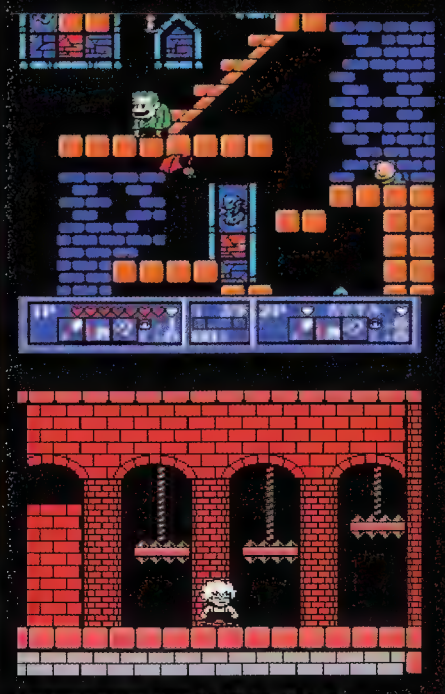
System: Game Boy Advance
Released: 2003
Japanese title: Castlevania: Minuet of Dawn

It's the year 2035, Dracula has been sealed in a lunar eclipse, but nothing was unfamiliar in this most recent Castlevania installment. The castle was a gorgeous accomplishment for Nintendo's handheld, rich and vibrant in ways comparable even to Symphony of the Night. The structure paralleled the RPG aspects of the past few games in the series, with the biggest change being the Tactical Soul System—suck the energy from the enemy and acquire their unique ability. For the most part, the game stuck to what has been working so well, and doing so to near perfection.

Castlevania Gaiden

Castlevania Spin-offs and Cameos

While the Castlevania games seen on these pages represent all of the true installments in one of gaming's most revered series, they certainly aren't the only places you'll find Dracula or the Belmont clan. Konami produced a cartoon parody of Castlevania called Kid Dracula, featuring a super-deformed Alucard, complete with fireballs and bat transformation. The Famicom version of Kid Dracula never made it to the U.S., but the Game Boy version arrived in 1993. Even more bizarre were the Konami Wai Wai World games for the Famicom. In these games, the Konami Universe was under attack, and it was up to the hero (Konami Man in the 1988 original, some dude named Rick in the 1991 sequel) to make things right—a duty that included traveling through Castlevania levels. In 2001 Dracula appeared as a playable character in the GBA game Konami Krazy Racers, and two stages take place in Dracula's castle, complete with the "Beginning" tune from Castlevania III. Less recently, both Dracula and a super-deformed Simon Belmont appeared in the Super Famicom's Gunbare Goemon 2, and a Simon-like character was a hidden boss in Contra: Hard Corps for Genesis; a techno remix of Castlevania's "Vampire Killer" song played during the battle. Perhaps most amusing of all is an appearance in the Hideo Kojima classic, Snatcher. Simon and Dracula can be found as costumed patrons in the club Outer Heaven, and further investigation prompts a Castlevania conversation where hero Gillian Seed exclaims, "I was so pissed because I couldn't jump off the stairs!" Gillian's partner replies, "According to statistical records, the teenage suicide rate increased dramatically in that year."



Castlevania oddities: Konami Wai Wai World 2 for the Famicom (top) and young Alucard in Kid Dracula.

Art: Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance // **Illustrator**: Ayami Kojima

“Let us go out this evening for pleasure. The night is still young.”

Maximo VS. Army of Zin

©2003 SUSUMU MATSUSHITA

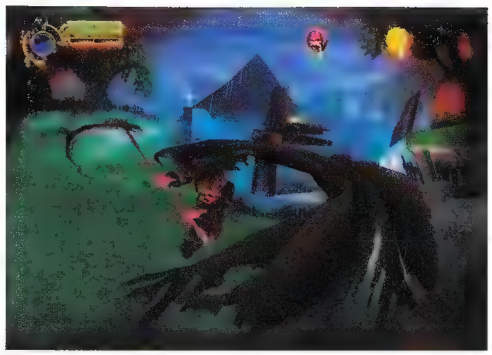
Video games can be such personal experiences, building atmospheric appeal out of the tiniest details that may leave one player merely interested, another player mesmerized. You can even play the game for a few minutes and know immediately it's doing everything you want it to on so many fun levels in so many right ways. After observing Maximo Vs. Army of Zin producer Mark Rodgers show off his enthused project, and finally getting a handful of levels to hack around in, my quick conclusion: this game belonged on my top ten of E3 list.

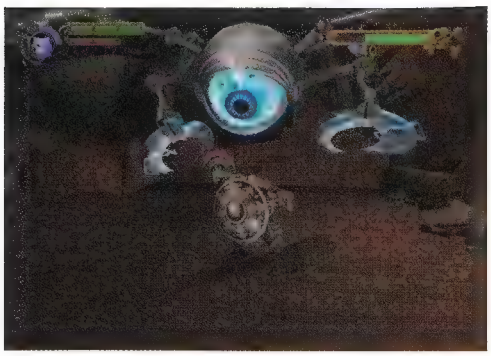
Of course, my enthusiasm radiates partly from the residual goodness of Maximo, the PS2 spiritual successor to Ghouls n' Ghosts. Army of Zin plays the part of sequel fantastically, holding on to everything that made the original so much fun, discarding some annoyances and adding to the components that needed embellishing. Gone is the brutal difficulty—is that good or bad?—replaced with "challenge, not frustration." Maximo is similarly outfitted as before, but he can now inventory his hard-earned items without having to periodically discard the rewards. The save system won't cost you this time around either.

The game structure hasn't changed all that much, it would seem, sticking to the same general mode of combat and platforming challenges. Maximo's previously limited combo system has been hugely bumped up, granting you as many as 30 different moves that will need fastidious exploring—don't worry, the game's no pushover—if you want to successfully continue the search for your poor lost love.

The gorgeously conceived monster squad Maximo faces is again credited to the masterful design strokes of Susumu Matsushita, who was just recently optioned by Disney to create their 75th Anniversary poster. His distinct style makes Army of Zin snap with pure delight, slipping effortlessly within the design team's richly playful world. There's a slightly darker edge this time, but the look of Army of Zin is not so far removed from the original. Initial impressions are that the game looks markedly improved in its artistry, benefiting from superior lighting and bolder colors. The biggest impact is in the keen details—dripping rain, blowing leaves, fiery debris, scintillating skies. When it's all moving, there's little out there that has such similar appeal; Maximo is an original treat.

And it's such a blast to play! There's nothing so new about Maximo that you'll be praising any boundary-bending. Its appeal is classic game design; Rogers cites his love for classics like Metal Slug and even Gyruss feeding its inspirations. It's all in the execution, and clever little touches like adding an element of villagers in distress make the game feel more adventurous and involving. As much as I like the game for its loose five-level preview, there's no doubting the pleasures that await in the final 16. Hey, if nothing else, with a continuing emphasis on much more story and fun little revelations, you get to find out where those boxers came from and what the real deal is with your savior, Grim.





"When it's all moving, there's little out there that has such similar appeal."

Can you find many games that sparkle with this kind of darkly playful shine?

Get Medieval on their ass

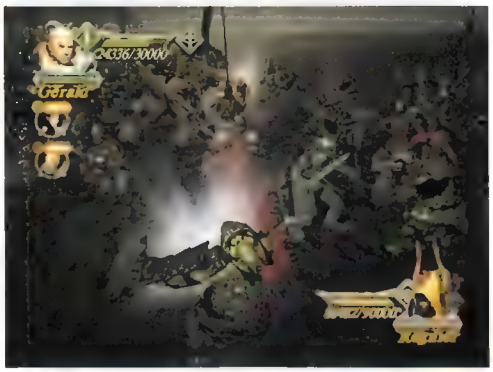
Kingdom Under Fire
The Crusaders

words dave halverson

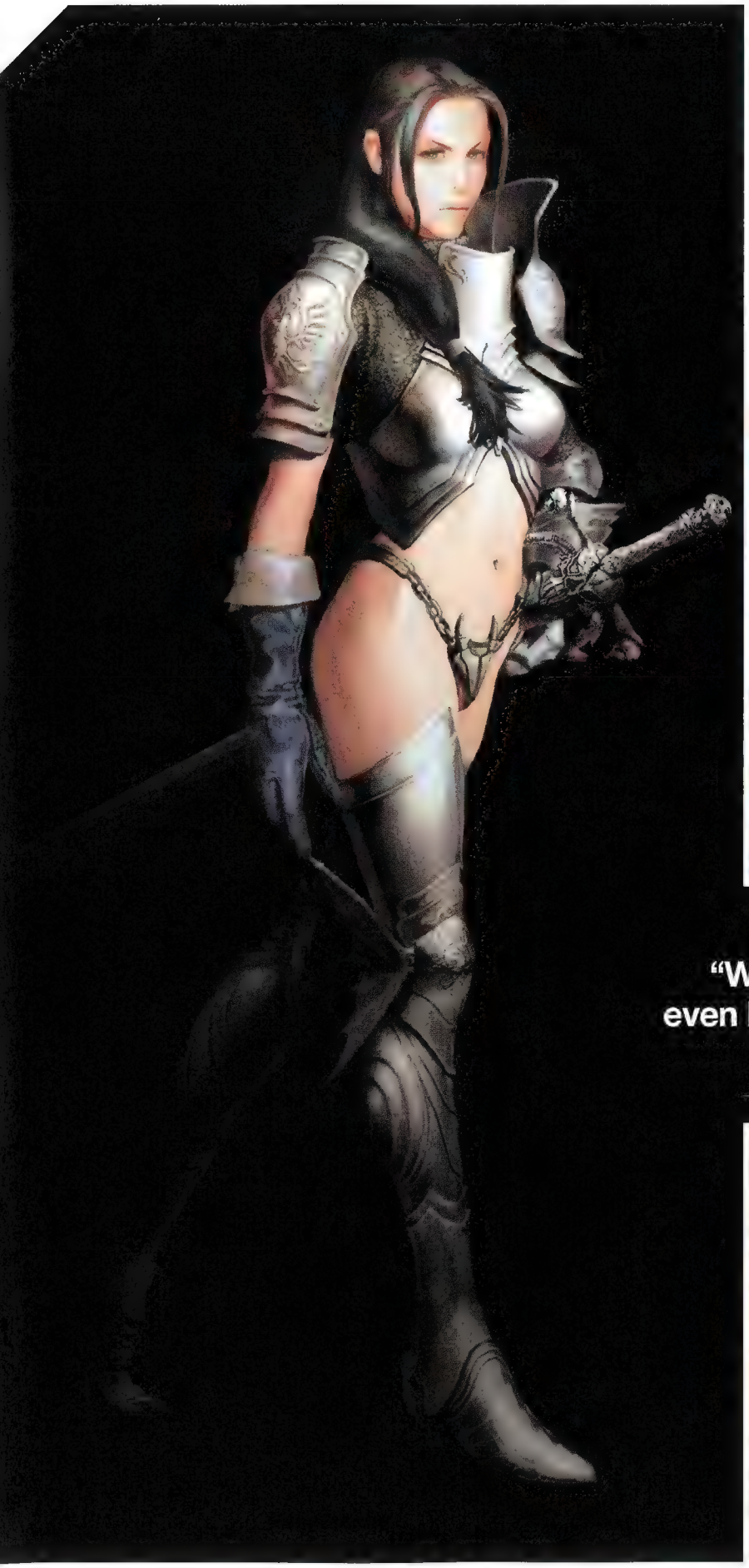
Like clicking a mouse to play a video game, real-time strategy has never done anything for me. Aside from Langrisser on Dreamcast, Dragon Force on Saturn and the Shining Force and Ogre Battle series, I have stayed for the most part, far, far away. Then I saw Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders. What was this magic of high art and even higher carnage I was witnessing? And how is it being harnessed on console? A thousand units on the battlefield with up to 100 on-screen, all hovering between 3000-5000 polygons each? Madness, pure madness. Better yet, you are in control of your main character, amongst the clash of leather and steel, hacking and beating the enemy alongside your legions. This, my friends, is the type of violence video games were meant to portray. I don't know; maybe I listened to "Bytor and the Snow Dog" too many times as a kid, but all things medieval or dark fantasy register 9.9 on my Richter Scale.

The Crusaders is based on a time after the Second War of Heroes, in a land called Bersia, divided by Humans and Dark Legions. The war—a race to attain the Ancient Heart, an artifact believed to give its owner dominion over the world—is now long past; humans see the tale as myth and the battlefield, known as The Alter of Destruction, merely as the holy ground where good and evil once fought. Fifty years hence, Pope Dimitri III of the ruling class considers the Heart an artifact of the devil and will excommunicate anyone who speaks of it. Seeking to unify the Bersian continent under one faith, after a scourge brakes out over a small town devastated by the Dark Legions, he orders crusaders to recover any lost holy ground and the land is once again plummeted back into war. Character classes are divided into five types between Dark Legions and Humans, of which you may choose from three human realms—Ecclesia, Azilla and Hironeiden—and two dark: Vellond, a region ruled by a half-vampire, King Waldermar, consisting of orcs, dark elves and ogres, and Hexter, a section of Vellond populated by orcs and ogres and ruled by a mysterious human named Regnier.

Aside from partaking in and directing the most epic vid-game battles ever witnessed, in between—while seeking refuge in castles throughout the land—you'll train your troops (and yourself), re-equip or buy new weapons, level them up, visit the pub to get information and listen in on rumors, trigger scripted events depending on where you travel, and of course choose your next battle. I won't even attempt to describe the sensation once in battle, but it is obvious that the team of artists and craftsmen behind this game understand what it means to swing an 80-pound



Carnage at its primal best, set within a gothic universe that beckons you to forge the ultimate army, and slay your demons



The art throughout KUF is exquisite, as is this lovely female warrior, who may or may not lop off your head for sport

sword and what it must have felt like when it met its target, be that armor, flesh or what have you. When engaged in battle, natural features affect strategic decisions. For instance, ground height will affect accuracy, defense and power; sunlight causes glare, which also affects accuracy; soil resistance affects speed and movement; and then there's day, night and the weather to account for.

You also control troop density: dense formations are powerful but slow and therefore open to siege, while wide formations are faster but more vulnerable. Add to these elements your hero's performance (a strong performance can turn the tide in battle) complete with special moves and abilities, as well as the power to call on sub-heroes and their magical prowess, and you've got another reason to invest in an Xbox. Not to sound biased—I'm really not—but you ain't gettin' this anywhere else.

preview

"What was this magic of high art and even higher carnage I was witnessing?"

19668/20000
Lucretia
To use your sub-heroes, Press Y or B when the buttons are blinking on their portrait.
5183/10000
Hironeiden Infantry

Poultry Geist

Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg

words dave halverson

"This is the type of crazy fun that pushed gaming to where it currently resides, which is ironic, given that destination has become largely blood-soaked."

Billy must hatch Golden Eggs to free the game's cockmasters... must be a goose in here somewhere

I feel sorry for Billy Hatcher, being the type of fruity-to-the-point-of-surrealism platformer that Naka fans live for. The problem being—or not, depending on how you look at it—that those fans are all grown up. Hopefully, the Sega brass won't equate "boy-in-chicken-suit-using-egg-to-beat-down-bloated-freaks" to kiddy fare, seeing how today's kids and teens (whom know not of Yuji Naka) will undoubtedly consider Billy Hatcher lame to the point of potential social banishment. It is so not-cool-for-school to start up a conversation about a chicken boy. Metroid or Metal Gear maybe, but the only thing Billy Hatcher will attract is spitballs.

What may or may not become a sensation, however, is still reason to celebrate for old-school gamers looking for a brand-new batch of Naka magic. It's not the new NiGHTS we were all hoping for, but rather, an entirely new brand from Sega's master architect, which may be better, given it's his first free-roaming adventure/platformer and is heavily NiGHTS-influenced, plus Naka hasn't lost a step.

Traditional in structure—like Miyamoto, Naka sticks to the formula, innovating purely on a gameplay basis—the game is hub-based, with seven themed worlds to conquer through repeated visitation, unlocking more and more complexity as you attain oneness with the high-concept (and highly addictive) gameplay. You begin each level by rolling or shooting an egg to pop assorted crow-possessed freaks that leave behind fruit (which is quite odd when you think about it) that Billy uses to grow and hatch his egg. Hatched eggs reveal monsters akin to their egg class, replacing the egg and possessing powerful attacks for Billy to use in battle and to solve puzzles. Hermie Hopperhead and Yoshi's Island had similar systems, but Naka's runs much deeper. The system wasn't fully implemented in our preview version, but given Naka's affinity for hatchlings, one can only imagine.

The goal, as decreed by Menie Funie, God of the Chickens and Lord of the Morning, is to free the chicken elders from their captive golden eggs where they've been imprisoned by the crows, who have taken over the Chicken World and, as such, morning. Man, I smell a Kellogg's opportunity stronger than the aroma of morning coffee.

Most of the game's play mechanics are egg-based. Billy can pile-drive, jump, boost, shoot and use them as a conveyance (adding a Monkey Ball vibe to the action), among other very, very cool things. Billy also answers the call when fellow fowl are in distress, and, once rescued, the different characters you've saved in the game become playable in certain levels.

This is the type of crazy fun that pushed gaming to where it currently resides, which is ironic, given that destination has become largely blood-soaked, as fantasy and fun have been sidelined for realistic killing simulations to some degree—a sad commentary on "mainstream" gaming. If you're one of the few who aren't real thrilled about blowing humans to bits, Billy Hatcher is your safe haven, so grab Sega's cock this fall and have some *real* fun.

preview

Flesh for fantasy

Alter Echo

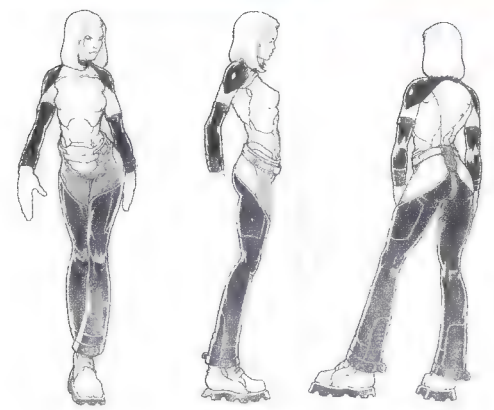
words dave halverson

Alter Echo caught my attention with the very first screen and I've been following its development ever since. What drew me to it initially was the uncharacteristic color palette reminiscent of Sega's Alien Soldier and character design similar to Shiny Entertainment's under-realized but oh-so-satisfying PS game, Wild 9. Like Wild 9's Wex, Alter Echo's protagonist, Nevin, dons gigantic boots and a peculiar exaggerated look, although that is where the similarities end.

It's the year 2850 and MultiPlast, a resource mined on a planet called Proteus, has become the world's most precious commodity. "Shapers" have the ability to telekinetically mold MultiPlast into whatever they imagine—from fashion wear to military applications—and Nevin is one of the IMS Corporation's best. Nevin is sent to Proteus to investigate, after Paavo—the greatest shaper of all time, sent there on a secret assignment—sends a cryptic transmission followed by every space nerd's worst nightmare: radio silence. Arriving on Proteus, Nevin discovers that Paavo has developed an amazing new MultiPlast he calls EchoPlast, so powerful it can manipulate time, only he's gone completely insane in the process and is now bent on using his discovery and its power for his own evil devices. Using his newfound ability to manipulate elements on the surface of the planet, Paavo and company (bodyguards Kess, a nasty bloodthirsty über-bitch, and Gherran, a big, dumb but very tough munitions expert) dot Nevin's path with peril, seal off pathways within the planet's twisted, organic, almost taffy-like catacombs, and try to kill him every chance they get. Luckily, Nevin's got some backup too: the rough-cut Stome, a corporate soldier with a fat stogy and a bad attitude, and Arana, a sexy female warrior with some serious blade skills. Nevin's closest ally, however, is one he never bargained for: the planet itself. As a by-product of the biocircuitry Paavo used to make EchoPlast, Proteus has formed a nervous system and become alive, fashioning the EchoPlast suit that Nevin wears from its own "flesh" so that he may shape-shift to combat Paavo's evil scheme. With such intersecting plot lines comes the inevitable challenge of successfully integrating them into the gameplay rather than bogging down the adventure to tell the story via cutscenes, using them as mere catalysts or an imaginary crutch to support the action. I've played more than a few buddy games, but few so connected or well orchestrated as this. Outrage shows a commitment to the craft with Alter Echo that's surprisingly seasoned for a new studio. Fighting side by side, the effective buddy-moves are complemented by multi-tasking scenarios like switch-operating or unified tactics, which almost always take place on the fly, and when Nevin is out on his own, the spirit of Proteus is always nearby. Ancillary characters move and look on par with Nevin, rather than low-poly drones meant to create the illusion of interaction. Granted, this isn't rocket science given the smooth architecture, but it's commendable that they designed the game to support their vision of a deep, real-time storyline within the context of fresh yet old-school gameplay. AE rarely stops to explain itself; events transpire as circumstances change within the flow of the action. Moreover, weaving these elements into its surreal combat/adventure/platforming package is merely where the game begins.

AE's real hook is Time Dilation, a unique alternate fighting style that enables Nevin to telekinetically strike multiple drones. Provided your gauge is full—which it always is at some point during battle—Nevin can easily dispense with multiple enemies by rhythmically matching the prompt on-screen with the corresponding button within the hot zone on a moving gauge...something like combining a golf swing with a dancing game; the longer the chain on the way to crossing each enemy's icon, the higher the damage value. You can always dispose of the enemy by conventional means, but mastering and administering Time Dilation is eminently more fulfilling. A similar system is used at Synch Nodes that warp Nevin and company from area to area, so either way, you're joining the rhythm nation. Then

Some serious R&D went into Alter Echo's character designs. Arana below, Nevin above.



there's the diversity afforded by Nevin's alternate forms—a massive turret-wielding alien and a clingy stealth-equipped amphibian. All three forms are integrated into the design in such a way that you feel connected to Proteus, your unit, and, most importantly, the action on-screen, which incorporates elements for each form.

Further depth is afforded the battles by way of crafty enemy AI. If Nevin attacks in the same fashion for a prolonged period, the enemy will block, and likely counter, 99 percent of the time. This might be frustrating if not for a truly inspired bevy of available sweep, fierce and juggle moves that can be upgraded, spending Plasm earned by stringing together attacks. As the game progresses, and the enemy along with it, so do Nevin's skills, keeping the action increasingly fast and fresh.

There's much to be said about Alter Echo's unique visuals, the surprising soundtrack, and some of the deeper aspects of the gameplay, so check back for my Outrage Q&A, along with the PS2 review and hopefully a look at the Xbox version, in the September **play**.

"AE rarely stops to explain itself; events transpire as circumstances change within the flow of the action."

Last action hero?

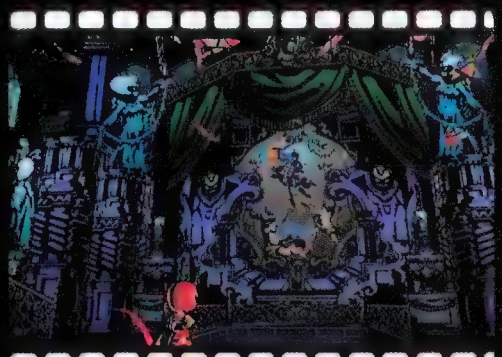
Viewtiful Joe

words dave halverson

The name Joe almost personifies ridicule. Joe Blow, Joe Mama, Joe this, Joe that...if your name is Joe, you're pretty much in for it. The Joe you are about to meet, however, may just make being named Joe cool.

This Joe in particular is more interested in the action onscreen than the action sitting next to him as he and his girlfriend Sylvia take in a classic Captain Blue movie at the local (and otherwise vacant) matinee. Things take a bizarre twist, however, when a Zeke Gundam-type giant robot vanquishes Captain Blue and then reaches out of the screen into the theatre, snatching Sylvia just before sending Blue's giant mech crashing into the front rows. Now that's entertainment; eat your heart out, T3D! The downed robot grabs Joe and into the film they dash, where the spirit of Captain Blue begins guiding Joe through his cinematic debut. After receiving his very own V-Watch (which in Captain Blue terms is like Yoda handing a Star Wars nut his lightsaber), Joe is able to transform into Viewtiful Joe and with the words "Henshin-a-go-go-baby!" 2D gaming is transformed.

Pretty much every time I see an oddity like Viewtiful Joe, I begin campaigning, pouring out my guts to anyone who will listen, only to later suffer unwarranted ridicule if said game doesn't set the world on fire (which this one had better). Dynamite Headdy, Mischief Makers, Jet Set Radio Future, Blinx, Herdy Gerdy, Voodoo Vince, Wario World (although the jury is out on the latter two)...you'd think by now I'd have learned my lesson...nope, hasn't happened. I think this diorama pop-up book of a game starring pint-sized super freaks that pose like fruity boys is the coolest bit of third-party magic to ever hit the GameCube. In fact, I'd love to see a whole genre of games emerge in its wake. Unless you have something against almost illegal fun and eye candy, I suggest you jump on this bandwagon right now.

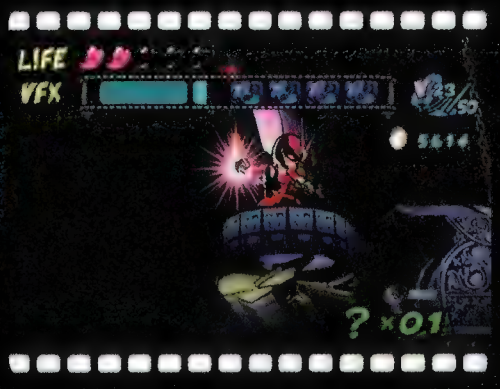


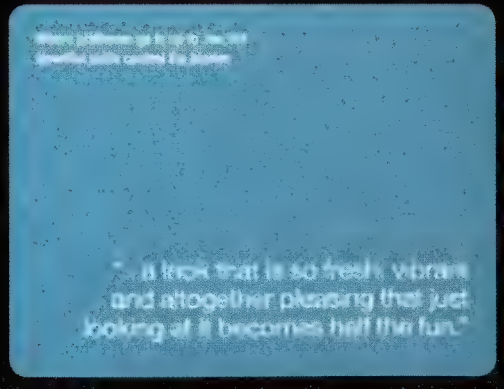
As you probably know by now, as his Viewtiful self, Joe can slow down and speed up time, but if you're thinking bullet time, think again. Viewtiful Joe is to Bullet Time what The Matrix was to conventional wirework; i.e. it rewrites the rules. Bullet time merely slows down action, but it doesn't necessarily change it. In Viewtiful Joe, slowing down or speeding up time allows Joe to do Viewtiful things that affect not only the fighting, but elements within the environments as well. Using this simple premise, Devil May Cry producer Shinji Mikami has crafted one of the most ingeniously designed video games of the past decade, a challenging pattern-based action/platformer that never stops surprising or challenging the player but staves off frustration no matter how intense the action becomes. The gameplay is so charged, so new, and so fun that do-overs serve as a means to a string of fulfilling ends, much like the original Ninja Gaiden or Legend of Zelda on NES. Remember life before strategy guides and the internet? Remember real gaming? Well, welcome back. This is largely due to some truly inspired balancing by Production Studio 4's crack GameCube staff. Slowing time to drop an attacking chopper from the sky or deflecting its missiles, you may think you're pretty clever, but the enemy—knowing that Joe's powers are limited—is doggedly aware. Once his gauge is depleted, Joe's a sitting duck, and it is here where the game's nuances take hold.

Time manipulation affects the world too; when Joe stands on a blade-propelled platform, for example, speeding up or slowing time affects its RPM, allowing you to ascend or plummet, depending on the situation. The ways in which your technique must rise to meet the challenge of the design never relinquishes, creating a very special link between game and player.

Joe serves up more than just Viewtiful gameplay, though. A mixture of 2D diorama-style layers and 3D cel-shaded polygons combine to create a look that is so fresh, vibrant and altogether pleasing that just looking at it becomes half the fun. The game plays as if off the reel, utilizing a grainy retro look when Joe is Joe, then once transformed, it's a Kodak moment. Such subtle touches adorn every inch of the game, from tiny puffs of smoke to intricately layered enemy innards, accentuating a bevy of in-your-face effects that send your adrenals into overdrive.

Viewtiful Joe is the first true innovation in 2D gaming since classics like Ninja Gaiden, Contra, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Gunstar Heroes and Super Mario World helped shape it, and it couldn't come at a better time for enthusiasts. Whether or not the "mainstream" gamers (a term I am rapidly beginning to loathe…I mean, aren't we all essentially mainstream? Good is good, right?) will catch on remains to be seen. It all boils down to the marketing and press in the end, and something tells me the buzz on Joe will be deafening. This is the kind of game that transcends labels, one that anyone and everyone should embrace for the good of gaming and their Viewtiful souls. To call it innovative is an understatement; buy it the second it comes out.

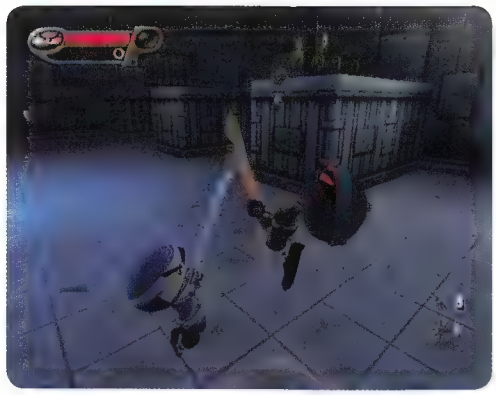




He-Ninja

I-Ninja

words dave halverson



Star Fox, Stunt Race FX, Alien: Resurrection, Croc, Buck Bumble, Red Dog, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Kung Fu Chaos, Malice... Despite 19 years making top-tier games, Argonaut remain, for the most part, outside of the spotlight. Like Traveler's Tales, Rare, Cambridge Studios and other such UK über-developers, they seem content tinkering away on game after game, for better or for worse. I've always loved their flare for concept: a game about a bee (eBay yourself a copy of Buck Bumble right now if you never played it), a protagonist car, a manga-style cutey with a hammer bigger then her body...you certainly can't accuse them of being boring. Their latest, I-Ninja for Namco, will mark the first out-of-house platformer for the industry giant, rounding out a stable that houses two kings of the road (Ridge Racer and Moto GP) and the quintessential fighting series for the ages—Soul Calibur.

So what's this funny-looking ninja with the bulbous head all about? Well, gameplay, really—diverse, intuitive, fun gameplay. Don't let the cartoon graphics fool you either; he may look like the bastard offspring of Mr. Garrison and Ms. Pac-Man, but he's an ass-kicker through and through. What keeps I-Ninja from becoming just another cartoony platformer for the pile runs the gamut from tone to gameplay. For one, his moves begins where most ninjas' end: besides dispensing every skill in the Ang Lee handbook, from wall runs to sword- and shuriken-play, he can rail-grind, negotiate half-pipes, barrel roll, chain grapple in every way imaginable and helicopter glide—and all of these maneuvers are integrated brilliantly into the lay of the game. Not to be outdone by any other squatty ninja types, Argonaut have also Xeroxed a page directly from the tome of Goemon. I-Ninja hops into and pilots a giant ninja-robot squaring off first-person-style versus 150-foot-tall giant robos, complete with combo punching, evasive maneuvers and supers. There's a lot to love here in terms of quality gameplay, rest assured.

It's clear that extensive character development and pre-production has gone into I-Ninja; effort that, if carried over into its marketing and retail push, could put Namco back in the platforming race, something that mysteriously the incomparable Klonoa couldn't muster.

With a mixture of play styles distributed between old-school timing/jumping drills, puzzle/action, arcade style fighting, robot battles and towering bosses, combined with an internationally revered ninja pedigree, what could possibly go wrong? Hopefully that big head won't get in the way. In the meantime, our vigil for a new Splatterhouse continues.

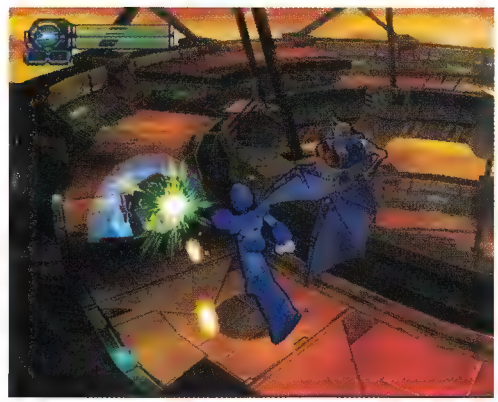
"So what's this funny-looking ninja with the bulbous head all about? Well, gameplay, really—diverse, intuitive, fun gameplay."

"You say I look cute!? Who-ata! Do I look cute now!?

Seventh time's a charm

Mega Man X7

words chris hoffman



"...it actually attempts to redefine what we've come to expect from Mega Man."

Mega Man X7 doesn't hide its mix of old and new, but rather wears it like a badge of honor, flaunting the classic gameplay that was birthed during the heyday of 8- and 16-bit, while showcasing the trappings of modern technology and game design. MMX7 isn't just the latest in a franchise that's spawned more than 30 games, nor merely the series' first installment on PS2; it actually attempts to redefine what we've come to expect from Mega Man.

The basics of the Mega Man X universe are still intact. X and Zero are still hunting Maverick robots in a troubled future, and this still means lots of traditional 2D platforming action and the obliteration of rogue Reploids. As usual, user-selected stages provide the battleground, with action occurring in a variety of neo-industrial themed stages—a lava-filled factory, a cybernetic forest, a futuristic highway and on the wings of an airborne battle fleet, to name a few—each commanded by a robotic, animal-inspired boss.

Mixed in with these venerable elements, however, is something new to the X series: 3D gameplay. Some areas take place in full 3D, not unlike the Mega Man Legends titles, while others offer unique perspectives and 2.5D play. Complementing this freedom of movement is more versatile combat; Mega Man now auto-aims at targets with a nearly 360-degree range, and the enemies are faster on the trigger as well. Some stages have more of an exploratory feel to them, and others have goals outside the familiar, like rescuing hostages before they are terminated.

Additionally, a new playable character has been added: Axl. It's unclear if Axl fights for good evil, but he certainly has talents that make him a worthy partner of X and Zero. Axl can hover and has excellent agility, Zero reflects shots with his laser sword in a manner that would make Luke Skywalker jealous, while X, with his chargeable X-buster, is pretty much the group's powerhouse. For each stage, players can bring two characters along for the ride, and they can tag in and out at any time, adding another layer of depth to the action.

All this is backed by striking cel-shaded visuals and some quality cutscenes, offering hope that Capcom has a renewed commitment to all aspects of one of their premier characters. With any luck, X7 will live up to the pedigree of the earlier Mega Man games that gave the series its longevity in the first place.

preview

Monstrous bosses are once again part of the Mega Man mythos. This is just the first one.

Dino Crisis 3

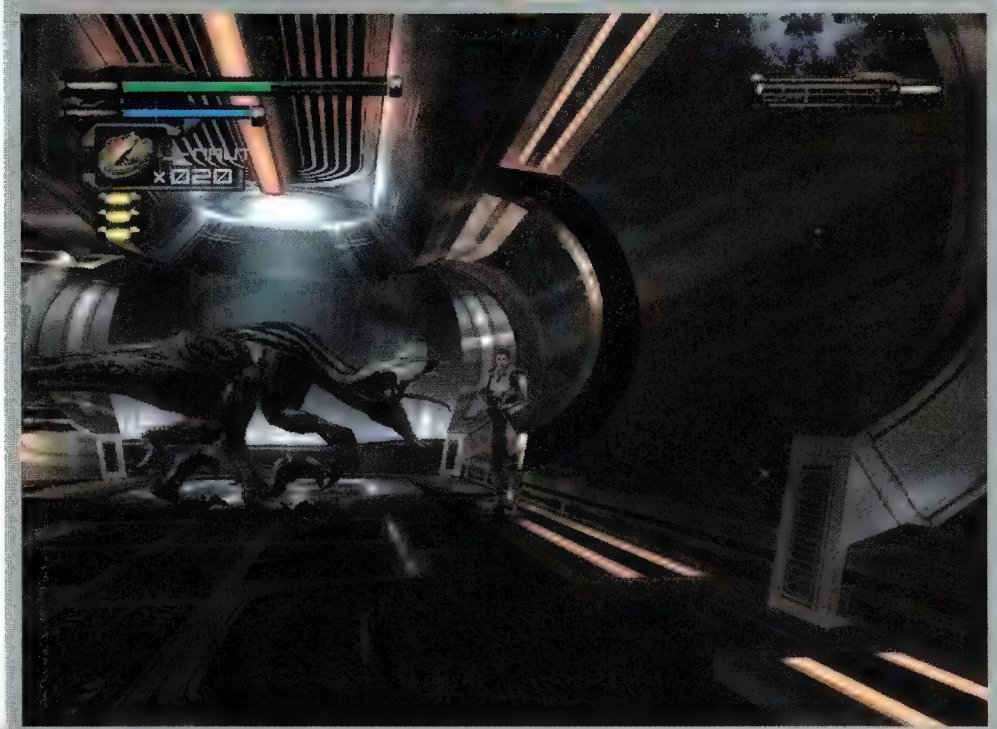
I have a weakness for great science fiction. Giant spaceships eerily floating through the depths of space stir my imagination. Far distant places in far distant futures excite my dreams. Bleeping computers and plasma conduits and metallic corridors and gargantuan, grinding machinery and cherishingly heavy space doors are just too cool. The makers of Dino Crisis 3 obviously relate.

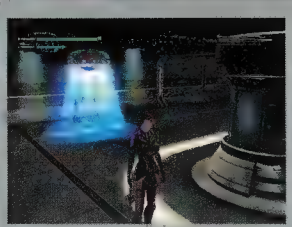
Introducing the crisis at hand is a captivating, technically extraordinary CG sequence depicting a mysterious shape-shifting ship unloading a massive energy beam that slices an innocent scout ship nearby. The crew is hurled into space, scattering a few survivors into the rescuing clutches of the majestically creepy attack ship. Other than the obvious, a pressing issue is at hand: why are there dinosaurs and other frighteningly aggressive creatures roaming the halls?

The answers come with a lot of shooting and traditional collecting, a lot of minor puzzle solving and door unlocking, and one of the most exhilarating game mechanics to come along in way too long—the booster pack enhancement. This death ship is the size of a city, with all sorts of dangerous equipment and massive obstacles around every corner. Navigating hinges on zipping around at lacerating speeds with your rocket device, hovering and dashing and circling hot spots.

Dino Crisis 3 is a pure action game at its heart, running on the intensity of its fast-paced play and platform-heavy roadblocks. One of the more unique elements to its gameplay is the shifting architecture of the ship, which provides the need to toss on your thinking cap and find new avenues of travel—it's like a gigantic metallic jigsaw puzzle—and it softens the boredom of backtracking that's typical to this type of game design.

The title may contain a No. 3, but this sequel is a bold departure from Dino 1 and 2, even with the familiar Capcom survival-horror fingerprints all over it. For its impressive, fresh aesthetic alone, punctuated by engrossing cinematic camera shifts, Dino Crisis 3 has the power to crush the competition.





"Dino Crisis 3 is a pure action game at its heart, running on the intensity of its fast-paced play and platform-heavy roadblocks."

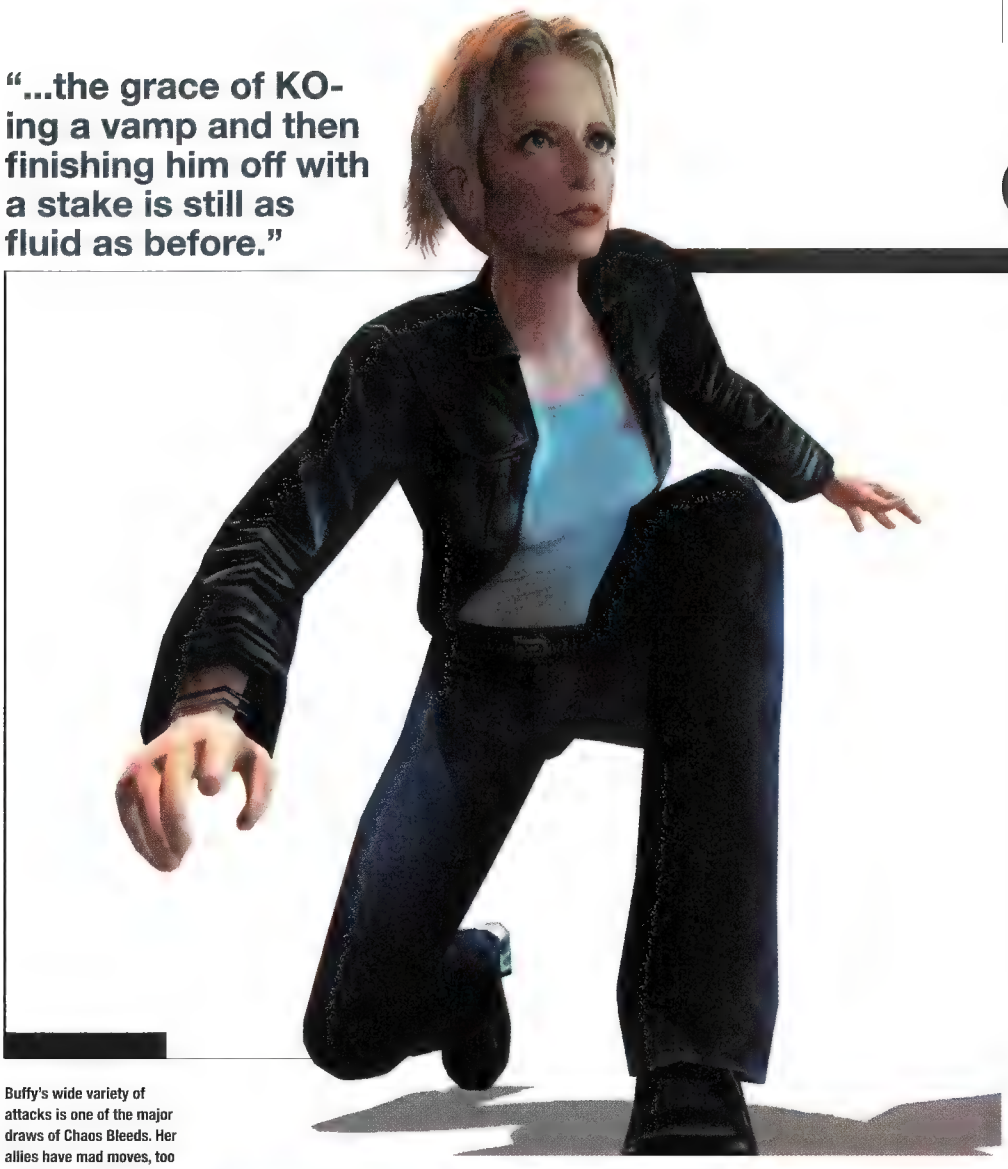
Back into the Hellmouth

Buffy The Vampire Slayer

Chaos Bleeds

words chris hoffman

"...the grace of KO-ing a vamp and then finishing him off with a stake is still as fluid as before."



Buffy's wide variety of attacks is one of the major draws of Chaos Bleeds. Her allies have mad moves, too

Buffy The Vampire Slayer: gone from network TV, but not from video games. Chaos Bleeds, the follow-up to last year's underrated Xbox title, is arriving on all three consoles, building off of the action and adventure of the previous game, while adding new gameplay elements and an original story.

Set during the show's fifth season, Chaos Bleeds pits Buffy against the source of all evil, The First, and an assortment of villains, including Ethan Rayne and Kakistos, as a dimensional rift causes realities to collide. For this apocalypse, however, Buffy won't have to save the world single-handedly. She now shares the playable-character spotlight with Willow, Xandar, Spike, Faith and Sid the Dummy (yes, the sentient wooden dummy from Buffy's first season), each with specific stages. Characters like Spike and Xandar (!?) essentially play like Buffy, but the addition of magic to Willow's repertoire lets her unleash wicked Wiccan spells like flames or the power of the sun via simple button combinations.

Buffy fans will be pleased to know that a good number of cast members provided their voices for Chaos Bleeds, including Spike, Giles, Faith, Xandar and Tara. A Sarah Michelle Gellar sound-alike does a remarkable job, but Alyson Hannigan's quirky sweetness will be missed.

Gameplay-wise, Chaos Bleeds is much like its predecessor, mixing vamp-dusting action with a pleasant amount of exploration and puzzle-solving. Though it runs on a completely different engine from the first Buffy game (it's modified from Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets), the action feels remarkably similar. Buffy still has a vast arsenal of punches, kicks and special moves to dish out punishment to the undead, and the grace of KO-ing a vamp and then finishing him off with a stake is still as fluid as before. The controls for both defense and administering the coup de grace have been simplified and improved, although in the preview version, focusing on attackers was a bit clumsy. In addition to fisticuffs, there are numerous weapons, such as crossbows, swords and shovels, to put the undead back from where they came.

Additionally, if players tire of the single-player mode, a multi-player mode is available, featuring 22 characters (many of them hidden), 16 types of power-ups and four modes of play: Survival, Slayer Challenge, Domination and Bunny Catcher (yes, bunny catcher).

We'll have to wait a bit a longer to see if Buffy's second console outing packs the same punch as the first one, but at the very least, it'll re-immerse fans in the graveyards of Sunnydale one more time.

preview

Making the world safe, one decimated robot at a time

Metal Arms

words brady fiechter

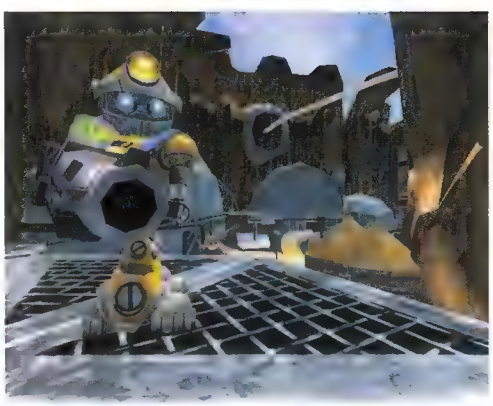
See that nasty on the right? Jack his CPU and he's yours

Neophyte So-Cal developers Swingin' Ape Studios are proving that apoplectic action games simply kick ass with Metal Arms: A Glitch in the System. Packing the firepower needed to single-handedly topple a metropolis is a determined robot named Glitch, forced into this all-mechanical war when planet Iron Star gets messed up by General Corrosive and his robotic thugs. In the first level alone, there's enough shrapnel and shredded metal to fill a landfill. Yes, this is indeed an action game.

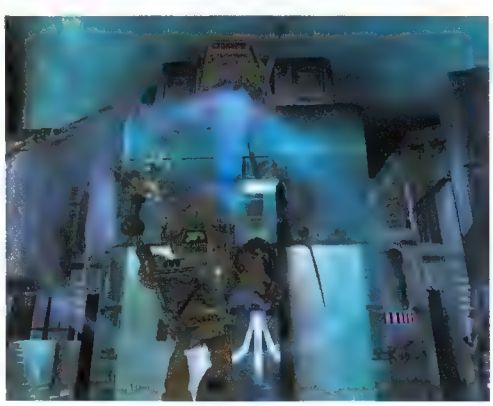
Glitch is an agile walking tank, armed with scores of guns and bombs that can be equipped in individual hands for even more offensive force. He's got a double jump that gets him to higher spots, which are often important havens for better angles of approach. Stepping directly into the chaos can be a fun move, but you quickly find that a calculated awareness of objects and enemies is a necessary move to successfully avoid eating a rocket. Find a roof or ledge to jump onto and zoom in on an unsuspecting foe for the fastidious kill or join a few of your buddies and plow straight ahead with bolt gun blasting—it's your war, your call for the situation at hand.

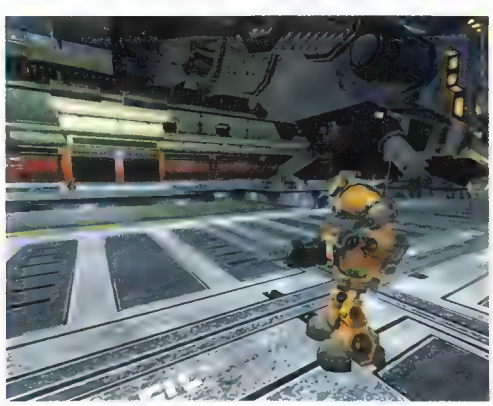
When direct assault won't do, saddle up to any number of the nasty robots and hack their CPU; the developers call this "robot possession." Once you're in control of what is sometimes a far superior warrior to Glitch, the destructive capabilities are just that much sweeter. Eventually you want to dispose of your puppet—just run it into a pit if you like—because, if you jack out, it regains control of its program and continues the pursuit. With the difficulty ramped on high, it's important to clear everything out before you even think about making headway through certain sections.

Metal Arms is going to sit in the shop a bit more to undergo the final 30-level finish. There's a lot here to like, from the basic design to the bright appeal of the all-robot world. Given the precision and intensity of its action, a perfectly smooth framerate seems to be the only crucial component left to solidify the foundation.



"In the first level alone, there's enough shrapnel and shredded metal to fill a landfill."





The fun of the book, now in convenient video-game form

The Hobbit

The Prelude To The Lord Of The Rings

words chris hoffman

Remember that part in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit where Bilbo slices his way past dozens of orcs and goblins single-handedly? What about his daring escapades where he uses his mad jumping skills to swing on spider webs and leap to precarious ledges? I admit, it's been a few years since I last read the literary classic, but I don't remember the journey being quite like this...and as a video game, The Hobbit is all the better for it.

The Hobbit plays a lot like The Legend of Zelda pumped up with a hearty dose of platforming: a 3D, sword-swinging, action-adventure fantasy quest. With his jumping abilities, ledge-grabs, rope-climbs and shimmying antics, Bilbo Baggins seems a lot younger here than he did in the book (though his feet are still hairy). Not only is he more sprightly, he's also a madman with a blade. Using his famous sword, Sting, Bilbo can fight with the best of them, and he can even charge up a spin attack not unlike Link. He's not limited to just swordplay, either; in our early version, Bilbo could also fight using a simple wood staff or hurl rocks at enemies from afar.

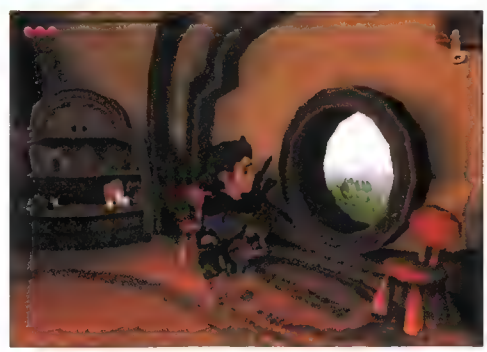
Aside from the fighting and platforming, puzzle elements are present as well. While acquiring keys and other such fetch quests are the norm for these types of games, Bilbo can do one thing that most fantasy heroes can't: he can turn invisible once he acquires the One Ring, making stealth in integral part of gameplay. Additionally, Bilbo can use his alleged thief skills to unlock treasure chests with timed button presses.

Even though the game takes liberties with the particulars of The Hobbit, it stays fairly faithful to the overall story, taking Bilbo out of the safety of Hobbiton and on a journey that spans Middle-earth, all the way to the Lonely Mountain where the dragon, Smaug, resides and beyond. Along the way, he'll travel to requisite locales such as Mirkwood and Laketown, and characters like Gandalf, the dwarves and Gollum all appear to play their parts in the legendary tale.

Tolkien purists will undoubtedly have aneurysms seeing the jovial, nimble adventurer that Bilbo has become, but gamers will most likely have every reason to celebrate.

preview

Check out the varied environs as Bilbo travels from Hobbiton to the Lonely Mountain



Exorcise your demons

Otogi

Myth of Demons

words dave halverson

If going in, I didn't know that Otogi was a product of From Software, I'd have never guessed. Exhibiting everything From isn't and everything Sega needs to become, entering the shark-infested waters of mainstream gaming, one might see Otogi as the first strike in the next next-generation war—a war Sega is adamantly preparing for. With dark themes on the rise and all things cute heading into obscurity, Otogi fits well into the Xbox schematic: it's violent, mission-based and vicious to the core, all without being gratuitous. And to any student of the old school, it also looks a lot like a Mystic Defender revival...so bless it be.

Based on classic Japanese mythology, Raikoh's quest begins after the ruling Imperial Court is swallowed by the blackest evil and the surrounding lands sucked dry of all life. Awakened by the soft voice of a higher power, Raikoh, of the clan who presides over the death of men, is summoned from his dark purgatory to cleanse his spirit by ridding the land of the demons that plague it and returning the world to the authority of mankind. The aesthetic of Japanese mythology has always fascinated gamers, due largely to two things: the visuals it affords, which when done correctly serve as the ultimate canvas on which to paint manic action, and the Gagaku court music (also used in Buddhist ceremonies), which in this case borders on pure mastery. The distinct yet simplistic sounds of the Taiko drum, Biwa strings, and Shakuhachi flute have a mesmerizing effect.

What looks to be strictly ground-based action and fighting akin to Chaos Legion is actually much more. The regions Raikoh "purifies" are laden with platforming elements (Raikoh employs an airborne boost much like Kelly O's in GunValkyrie), unique mission ops and massive boss hubs. Raikoh confronts a poison river of death fighting to keep dead souls from sinking his vessel of passage, uses melee and ranged attacks against demons who only show weakness by the light of the moon, and often must divide his attacks between demon hordes and his target, be it a sky-high tower or hideous monstrosity. There are over 25 levels altogether, which, depending on your skill level and how you choose to play, take anywhere from 12 to 20 hours to cleanse. Rather than a conventional life bar, Raikoh's life force slowly drains as he assails each stage, becoming refilled as he collects souls, and RPG elements, like weapon, magic, and accessory management (via a shop), keep things interesting as you build Raikoh's attributes to your liking. The action itself is explosive and brutal: a fierce strike may send an enemy hurling back a hundred yards into a cliff face or temple, and most everything in the environment, from thick concrete walls to dojos, can be obliterated by sword. Mass destruction mixed with nimble action and platforming is the name of the game.

Visually, From have truly outdone themselves. Bump mapping is not employed, but just about every other trick in the book is. The game has a glow all its own, the models and environments are beautiful, and the clouds, water and armor are magnificent to behold. Even the loading screen is mystical, with cherry blossoms slowly drifting down as you await your next objective.

There's little here to discredit if you're in the market for a unique action game, especially if you're more drawn to fantasy than realistic killing (and if you're not, you should be). Otogi is an exquisite game—a mission-based adventure that is at once familiar but also entirely different.

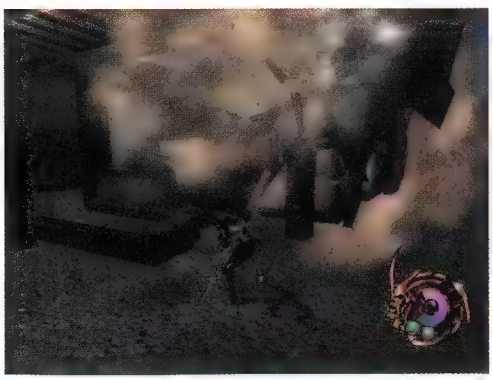
preview

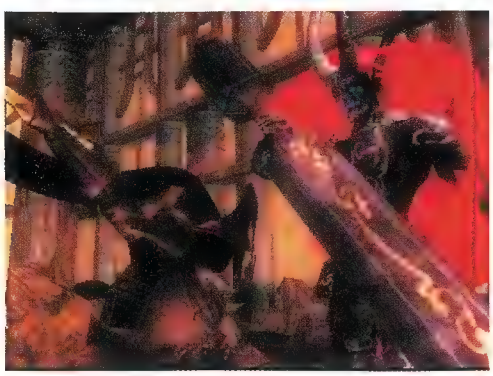
How do you kill that which is already dead? Combos!

"There's little here to discredit if you're in the market for a unique action game..."

interview

Rintaro Yamada
Assistant Manager, Planning Dept., From Software





play: Otogi feels very much like a Sega game. Did Sega approach From to develop the concept for them, or did From develop it and bring it to Sega?
Rintaro Yamada: The title was originally developed by From, and Sega approached From to publish it overseas. Sega saw potential in the game for the overseas markets, and thought that Otogi would help strengthen its current lineup. While it wasn't developed with Sega specifically in mind, it was a quality game that Sega was quick to identify with, and worked with From to publish the game overseas.

Did any of Sega's developers collaborate with you on the project?
While Sega certainly provided feedback and a few nuances were adjusted before release in the overseas markets, the game was developed solely by the talented creators at From Software.

Was the game designed primarily for the Japanese market or the West?
From the beginning of development, we aimed for a title that would have both domestic and abroad appeal. I think the ability to play within completely destructible environments is refreshing and immediately fun for gamers in both domestic and oversea markets.

What is your opinion of the Xbox market in Japan? Is the console gaining support?
I regard the Xbox as an attractive piece of hardware that allows for fresh and fascinating game design elements. I expect that brilliant titles will be released in the future for the Xbox and the hardware will gain much more support.

The amount and quality of the effects in the game are staggering. I especially noticed the lighting and quality of the water, both in appearance and physics. What was your biggest challenge in terms of the effects?
Like you mentioned, various effects are used in huge amounts in this game, but there is still a limited amount of space. Within these limits, we had a very hard time striking a balance among the effects in order to create the most attractive game. The water effects in particular turned out to be one of the harder elements, because while they were not difficult to create, they often exceeded the space available to implement them. However, we feel our efforts were ultimately worthwhile since they resulted in a game with a balance between glossy effects, such as the lighting and water, and dazzling destruction-generated effects.

One of the only effects not used is bump mapping. Would the effect be possible given the scope of the environments?
Because our priority was to focus on flashy effects, bump mapping is not used. However, I feel that bump mapping would have enhanced the game by giving shadows more realistic sensations through movements of the light sources.

The music in the game is exquisite. Is it traditional Gagaku or somewhat enhanced? Are there a lot of musicians who still play it?
The music was created with aspects of Gagaku, one of the traditional Japanese music forms. The music's appeal was achieved by successfully fusing unique tones and the elegance of melodies which ancient Japanese music like Gagaku has. I would like players to listen to the music while they are playing the game.

Will From continue to create first-party games for Sega or was this a one-time deal?
If given the chance, we would like to continue to provide titles to Sega. To that end, we must continue to develop attractive games.

Now that you've had the opportunity to develop for the Xbox, will it be difficult going back to the PS2?
Each hardware console has each own individual features and attractions, so it is not that difficult. Because we most recently learned the potential the Xbox possesses through development of Otogi, we would love to develop a new game for Xbox.

In America, gaming has become very realistic and violent. Otogi is based in mysticism, so the violence is fantasy. What is your opinion on the bloodthirsty U.S. market? Is it a trend you hope will pass?
We often hear that violent games are popular in the U.S., but it has not been made clear why such games are preferred. As a characteristic of the U.S. market, I suppose there is a trend that people seek reality in games, but this point is one of the most important elements in creating most games. While I feel it is problematic to create something extremely radical with violence and blood, it really depends on whether they seek blood due to pursuing reality or a lust for violence.

Dead presidents

XIII

words dave halverson

It's funny how history always seems to repeat itself. No matter how technologically advanced gaming becomes, it always seems to step in the same pile of poop over and over again. Sixteen-bit was flooded with side-scrolling shooters to the extent that even if you lived for them, there were just too many. Ultimately, shooters became so exhausted, they stopped making them almost entirely, and the genre pretty much died. Enter 3D and the by-product of its incubation period—the first-person shooter. Initially produced for their simplicity—saving polys by negating a viewable lead character, allowing them to run on sub-par 3D machines like the Jaguar, 32X, Saturn and PlayStation—they have somehow lingered on, sans feet, legs or any connection to the environment. Climb any ladder or swim in an FPS and you'll see why I don't play them. Regardless, like in those 16-bit days, developers continue to produce them like rabbits in a Viagra lab, beating the genre into such a stupor I can barely bring myself to crack a jewel case. Aside from Halo 2, Half-Life

"The game is so unique in execution and production values, you almost forget you're playing an FPS..."

2 and Doom III, do I need even bother? To get me to play as a floating arm these days certainly takes some doing, which is exactly why I'm penning this preview. Much to my surprise, a handful of developers are attempting to breathe new life into this ICU of gaming, aside from the aforementioned 800-pound gorillas; Human Head's wild western Dead Man's Hand and Ubi Soft's XIII are both looking to pump more into the screen than just lead.

After breaking my resolve to never again play as half a right arm, XIII actually rekindled the love I had for this genre back when AVP, Final Doom and Jumping Flash consumed my nights. The game is so unique in execution and production values, you almost forget you're playing an FPS, caught up instead in the story and noir flavor integrated in stylish, living comic-book fashion. Anyone who remembers the amazing Genesis game Comix Zone and what it did for 2D action knows what I'm talking about. The look and feel of XIII allow it to transcend the stale nature of its pedigree. Enemies threatening your position pop up in panels, prompting you to their location and intentions; rather than sound cues, characters beyond walls and doors are represented by animated captions; and segues and inner-mission prompts unravel in novel form. All of this is painted like fine art, cel-shaded in a way that it doesn't appear so, but rather as something entirely new. Although the demo I played was limited in terms of flow, the story progression within the levels floored me, as did the diversity and story implementation within the missions.

There is much room for first-person shooters to evolve, just as much as there is for them not to, given that millions still dig them as-is. Not being one of them, XIII makes me very happy. Give the lead some feet and legs and I may just go back to the hell again.

system: ps2, xb, gc, pc • publisher: ubi soft
developer: ubi soft • available: tba
preview

Smoosh! Nailed right between the eyes! And look at the respect he gets on his way out.. now that's a beauty way to go!

interview

Olivier Berteil, XIII associate producer

play: Your bid to reawaken the FPS category has certainly done so for me. After swearing off playing anything starring an arm ever again (save the Halos and Doom IIIs of the world), I'm totally into it. Tell us how this concept and its execution came about.
Olivier Berteil: After we obtained the license to the hugely successful XIII graphic novel series, we began thinking about the kind of game we wanted to make. We knew from the outset that we wanted to keep the intriguing story. We dreamed of doing a first-person shooter, but we needed to create something completely original. There are no other games like this to take inspiration from—we are setting a precedent! Therefore we decided to use a stylish cel-shading technique from American comic series such as "100 Bullets" and "Sin City" and other comic elements like pop-up windows for a headshot instant kill.

Are you designing the game in an open-ended fashion?
Since we need to keep the game's overall plot and scenario in mind, XIII contains some scripted events to lead the player in the correct direction and to the most important scenes. But there are a lot of self-made choices of how to progress through a level (i.e. stealth or all-out action) and how to complete the challenging but nail-biting tasks that occur throughout the game.

The initial death scene (sad, she was so hot) indicated an M rating. Are you getting bloody? Pushing the sexual envelope in any way?
The violence in the game is very stylish. Style is what we're all about. It's the same kind of violence that you'll see in the hit American comics. There is blood in the game, but we don't want to make it the primary goal for the player. And for the sexual envelope…well…just play and see. I'm kidding! Sex is not a relevant part of the game.

What was pre-production like? Was the graphic novel used as a storyboard?
Indeed, that's a good question. Some of the game content was storyboarded and we decided which primary elements of the original graphic novel we wanted to keep. We then decided where all of the different action points would take place. Then, after a lot of other hard work such as creating our unique visual artwork and gameplay style, the game-designers created the initial map.

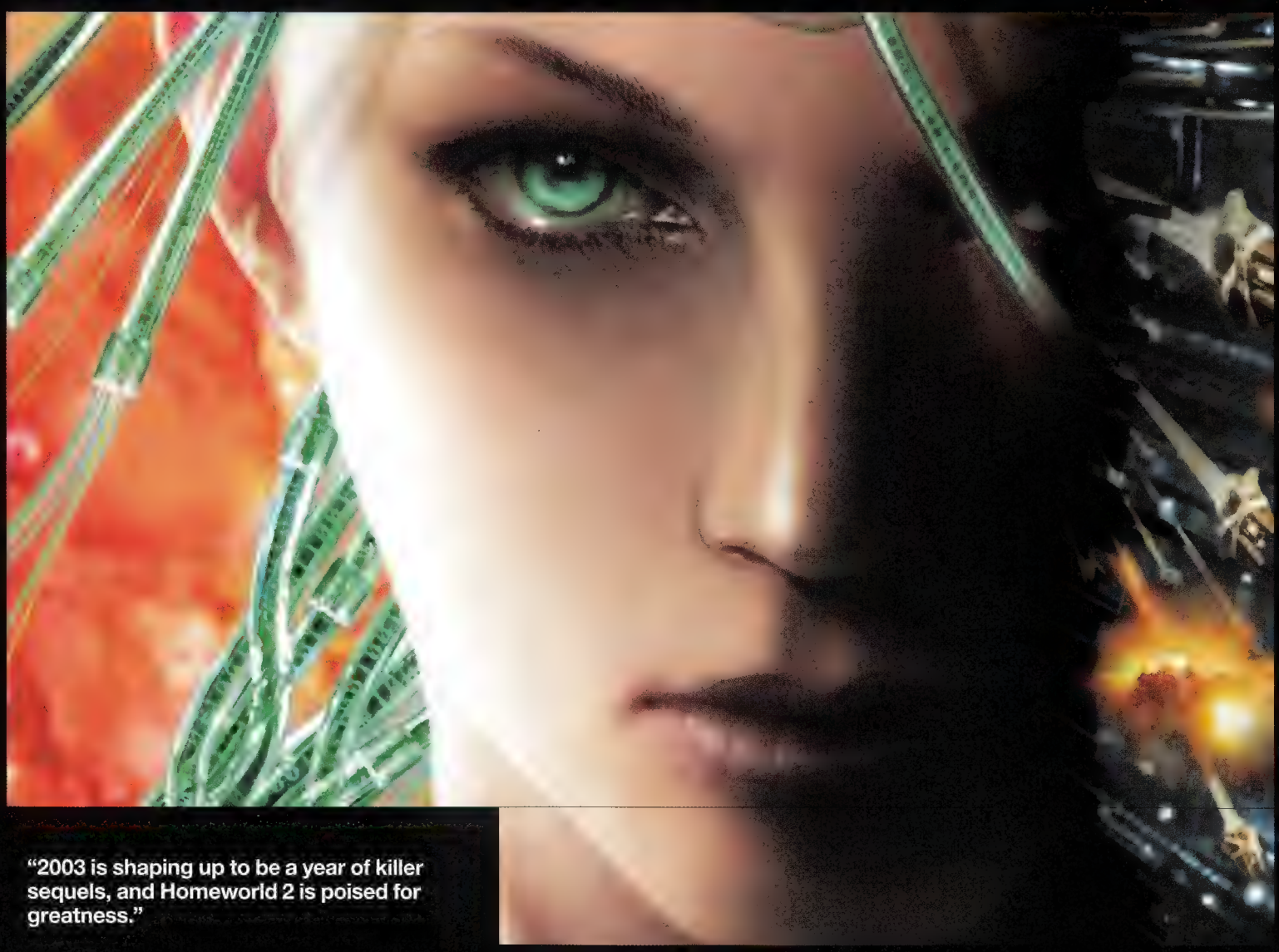
The type of cel-shading you're painting the game with seems completely new, beyond anything we've seen. Is this a technique you developed?
Absolutely correct—our visual style is totally unique and sets a new benchmark in the genre. Cel-shading was not our primary selling point. It's simply the best tool we could find to create the graphic-novel world we wanted! Even if the visual element of cel-shading seems straightforward, the engineers worked a lot to adapt the engine for effects, lights and shadows—all of which are very particular when using cel shading.

What about the engine? Proprietary or recycled?
We use the new Unreal II engine in order to create XIII's revolutionary appearance. Of course, we adapted it to get the best results for our game—and it's worked according to the amazed feedback and excitement we get whenever we show the game to anyone.

Finally (for now), are you designing XIII as a franchise from the get-go? Has Ubi Soft given the marketing angle any special consideration yet?
The XIII license was very strong before the game itself. We don't know yet if and what merchandise we're going to release—keep your eyes peeled!

Homeworld 2

words tom ham



"2003 is shaping up to be a year of killer sequels, and Homeworld 2 is poised for greatness."

When Relic Entertainment released Homeworld back in 1999, it changed the way we looked at real-time strategy games. Not only was it ambitious with its storyline and visual style, it took the game into unfamiliar territory—a complete 360-degree 3D environment. No other game to date has been able to recreate the jaw-dropping, epic spaceship battles that were in Homeworld. I remember the first time I watched my units go into formation before engaging the enemy. With several dozens of units going in while motherships were blasting their multiple turrets and ion-beams, it was truly something out of Hollywood.

Having been in development for a couple of years, the highly anticipated sequel to Homeworld is receiving its finishing touches from Relic Entertainment. The developers have totally remained faithful to the original game, yet they have evolved the gameplay in amazing ways. 2003 is shaping up to be a year of killer sequels, and Homeworld 2 is poised for greatness.

One of the biggest strengths of Homeworld was the storyline. The Exiles, or Hiigarans, who were led by Karan S'jet, returned to their Homeworld after a tortuous battle with the evil Taiidan. Homeworld 2 will continue the story of the Hiigarans, however, this time they're facing a brand-new threat, the Vaygr. Where in the first game you reclaimed your home, now you have to reclaim your destiny. "Homeworld 2 is set approximately 100 years after the return of the Exiles," explains Dan Irish, executive producer on Homeworld 2. "Many thought their hardships would end when they returned to Hiigara, but fate would not be so kind. From the Inner Rim, the Hiigarans face a new and bitter enemy wielding the power of the ancients. Homeworld 2 focuses on the valiant journey of the Mothership and its crew. This journey takes the Hiigarans into the oldest regions of the galaxy to confront their new foe and learn the truth behind their exile."

The original Homeworld had units that were not only unique, but each had their own specific role and function. Homeworld 2 introduces new units that will blow you away. "Homeworld2 features two unique fleets of ships," continues Irish. "There are some similarities between the Homeworld fleet of the Kushan and the Hiigarans of Homeworld 2. While there are some descendants of Homeworld, most are new and have never been seen before. Of course, the design of the Mothership has survived for this long, so as you can see in the screenshots, it remains the mainstay of the fleet. We've had the Hiigaran shipyards hard at work for several years now, preparing some of the largest ships ever seen before, like the Battlecruiser, Shipyard and, of course, the new Mothership. You'll find that the galaxy is scattered with huge megaliths (remnants of an ancient civilization long since past) that fill the voids of space and are much larger than any ship. The ships vary in size from 48 meters to 8 km in length, so there's quite a variation and several examples of vastness of scale."

Capital ships were in the original Homeworld and will feature prominently in Homeworld 2. Players will remember the Capital Ships with their devastating firepower. However, Battlecruisers, Carriers and Shipyards are not all-powerful. Smaller fighters and corvettes, when used in combined forces, can quickly topple Capital Ships. This is what's going to make Homeworld 2 so compelling. The game is all about strategic choices—focus on big ships only, and you leave yourself open to ambushes and Subsystem attacks; rely only on smaller and nimble Strike Craft and you may not have enough firepower to deal your foe that final devastating blow.

Although Relic Entertainment successfully pulled off a complete 3D world for their space battles in the original Homeworld, the whole process of controlling your units wasn't the easiest thing to do. Players not only had to control what was in front of them, but they had to control other units on various different planes of space. Thankfully, the developers listened and changed Homeworld 2 accordingly. "One of the biggest improvements is that we've included camera panning," explains Irish. "This allows the user to move the cursor to the edge of the screen and, as a result, the camera will move in the same direction. This is a standard RTS convention that was missing in Homeworld. We've also included the ability to move the camera forward and backward by panning to the top and bottom of the screen, respectively. This really provides a degree of freedom that was missing in Homeworld. Secondly, we've include an on-screen interface that allows the user to do everything from within the game. All menus are included on the task bar and are semi-transparent so that there is never a reason to leave the game experience to build more ships or research technology. This is all included on-screen. There are plenty of options regarding the menu and you can choose all, some or none depending upon your skill level and preference. The interface can even be fully minimized to provide that truly cinematic experience once you've memorized all of the hotkeys! On top of that, we've refined the in-game interface so that it is easy to recognize what you're looking at and how it works. In the end, the interface should prove scalable—the more choices the better!"

But without question, what made Homeworld so amazing were its visuals. From the vapor trails of the spaceships to the glorious explosions, you can imagine the expectation level is pretty high for Homeworld 2. "We're really excited about what we can do with the new hardware from both Nvidia and ATI," concludes Irish. "They've made some real strides that will help us make a fantastic-looking game. One of the new features that we use is pixel shaders. They allow us to have textures that emit light on a per-pixel basis. This will bring realism to the hangars, bridges of ships and the engines. Also, specular maps (which are part of the pixel shaders) allow us apply damage to shiny surfaces. Players can see the damage to their ships, as well as differentiate between completely damaged or roughed-up areas or undamaged areas. You'll also be amazed at the dynamic lighting. When flying near a fleet of ships, you'll see that they actually cast lights on other ships. This adds tremendous depth to the realism."

With 15 missions (and a tutorial) and various multiplayer modes, Homeworld 2 is shaping up to be a contender for best RTS this year. With the field already dominated by games like Rise of Nations and the upcoming Warcraft III Expansion Set, it'll be interesting to see how Homeworld 2 will stack up.

Tak and the Power of Juju

system: ps2, gc / **developer:** avalanche software / **publisher:** thq / **available:** fall

I'd seen the screens and heard the post-press-junket jubilation, but I had no idea how magnificent this game would ultimately be. Provided Avalanche can tame the frame rate, this is one of the most beautiful platformers I've ever seen, and better yet, it's packed with free-roaming wonder, fun and ingenious design. If it pleases the Juju gods, we'll have an extensive preview in the September issue. There's a Nick toon and loads more behind Tak as well. THQ is really coming on. *-DH*

Alias

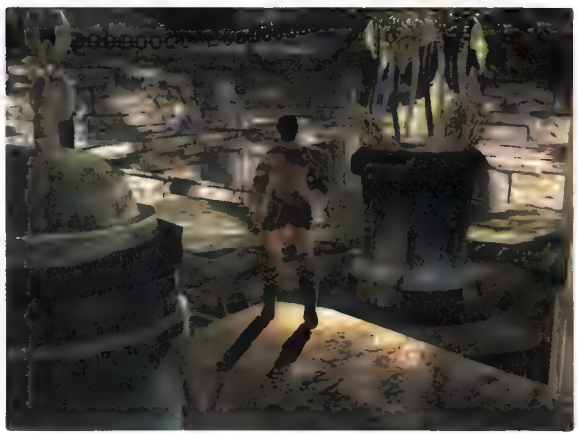
system: ps2, xbox, pc / **dev:** acclaim cheltenham / **publisher:** acclaim / **available:** oct

The über-talented Cheltenham arm of Acclaim is finally taking a stab at action, and are they ever doing it right. Alias showed extremely well at E3 (we couldn't jam it in last month's coverage), including a Sydney model sporting the most realistic dress ever conceived (one of her many disguises) and is rapidly closing on beta. The game's designers are focusing on a mixture of stealth and perfectly tuned fighting and seem to be succeeding at both. Buffy may finally get some competition in the TV crossover category. *-DH*

Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance

system: ps2, xbox, pc / **developer:** acclaim / **publisher:** acclaim / **available:** fall

Think the movie, only bloodier. This is not an arena fighter, by the way (thankfully), but rather a very similar journey to the wheat-sweeping weeper, only steeped in mythology and enough gore to please even the pickiest head-splitter. His finishing moves literally split foes like wood and the adventure elements of the game are bathed in volumetric lighting. Restore the glory of the empire this fall. *-DH*



Charlie's Angels

system: ps2, gc, xbox / **developer:** ubi soft / **publisher:** ubi soft / **available:** winter

Though once convinced there weren't enough polygons in the world to replicate Cameron Diaz's butt, I may be proven wrong. Surprisingly, Charlie's Angels looks pretty okay—maybe not what I'd call full-throttle, but okay. The jury is still out on the virtual Angels' game debut, which lets you switch between Angels, kicking butt and taking names. However, after the first film's $265 million worldwide take and the buzz on Full Throttle, it could be about Charlie's anus and make a fortune. *-DH*

McFarlane's Evil Prophecy

system: ps2 / **developer:** konami / **publisher:** konami / **available:** nov

Looking like the ultimate monster mash, EP takes us back to the early 19th century where six evil forces have awakened, just begging to be put back to sleep. Battle legions of the undead (over 150 types) on your way to taking down Dracula, Mummy, Werewolf, Frankenstein, Sea Creature and Voodoo Queen, all coincidentally based on Todd's action figures. *-DH*

The Suffering

system: ps2 / **developer:** midway / **publisher:** midway / **available:** fall

It's the bloodiest, crudest, most disgusting game ever created...and if not for the surreal overtones, one I would never, ever play. Given that it is technically a psychological horror game, with character designs by Stan Winston, we'll give it a go next month. But be warned: this game actually will break a child...we all saw what porn did to Butters, so please, if you must delve into this bloody mess, do so far away from anyone under 18. *-DH*

Unreal Tournament 2004

system: pc / **developer:** epic games, digital extreme / **publisher:** atari / **available:** fall

Unreal Tournament 2004 is still a bit of a mystery, but you just know it's going to blow your mind. Everything from 2003 will be included, beefed up with 20 new maps, redesigned textures, tons of music and many other solid key features. Vehicles will also be placed into the chaos for the first time, bringing more explosive action to the battles. *-Br*

Painkiller

system: pc, xbox / **developer:** people can fly /
publisher: dreamcatcher / **available:** winter

See, this is why I own a PC, which is where Painkiller will appear first. Further proof that there isn't necessarily life after death, but rather, heavy carnage in a Gothic purgatory somewhere in between, in Painkiller you assume the role of Daniel Garner, a regular guy killed in a car accident looking for the reason he's been kept out of heaven, and instead inserted into an unholy war of truly biblical proportions. PK's Havoc 2.0 physics engine displays 100 times the polygons of the most recent batch of FPS games (the average level is 350,000 polygons) and also incorporates advanced vertex and pixel shaders, including water, glass, volumetric lights and fog. Seems to come with a few guns too... *-DH*

kill.switch

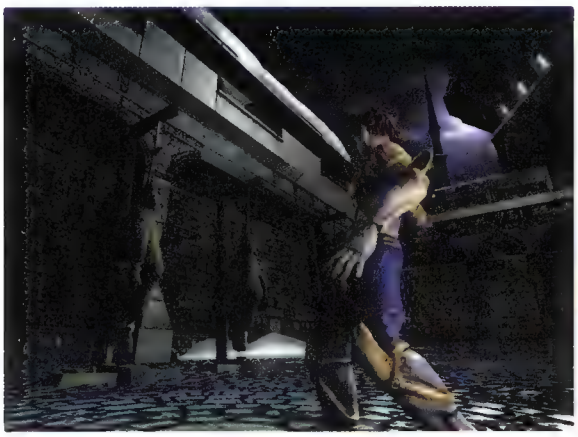
system: ps2, xbox / **dev:** namco /
publisher: namco / **available:** fall

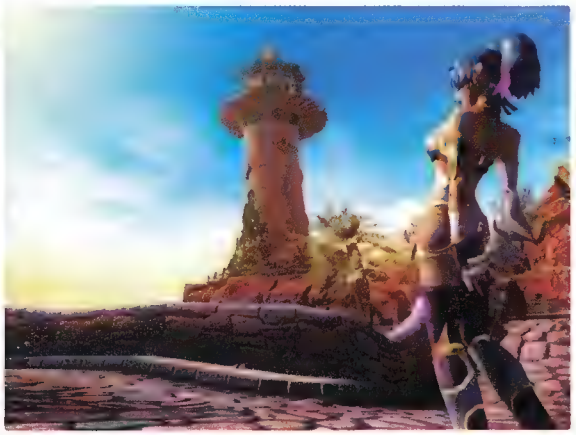
After taking an in-depth look at kill.switch, it's apparent the game is truly striving for a unique spin on third-person shooting—and achieving its goal. Run and gun and you get your head torn off; the object of the game is taking cover and carefully monitoring the layout of every situation. The developers are keeping aggressively quiet on the story behind kill.switch, but it's receiving huge attention. *-BF*

Disgaea

system: ps2 / **developer:** atlus /
publisher: atlus / **available:** september

Atlus' new strategy-RPG is a testament to Japanese character design, hand drawn character art and a genre on the brink. Few games of this ilk are on the PS2 slate, and of them, none can match the story or presentation on display here. The game is brimming with character classes, spells, some great innovation and an old-school RPG tale that unravels like a breath of fresh air these days. Disgaea showed up a little late to hook up a full review but we're hatching one as we speak. *-DH*





Sudeki

system: xbox / **developer:** climax / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** fall

Discovering that the stunning village we've been drooling over is indeed real-time, I asked designer Thomas Pirinen if it was the only one in the game (isn't that always the case?), and was amazed to find out it's actually the smallest! Sudeki defies the graphics scale we are currently on and the gameplay looks to be coming along nearly as well. Microsoft's Zelda is at hand. I've managed to squeeze a little Sudeki into the last few issues, and I don't plan to let up any time soon. Check the bump mapping on the left hand screen...wow. *-DH*

Roadkill

system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** midway / **publisher:** midway / **available:** fall

Another E game from Midway, this one is similar to GTA, only you stay in the car. Why get out, after all, when a hood-mounted cannon is standard equipment? Set in a post-apocalyptic world destroyed by a plague and ruled by gangs, Roadkill is 30 levels of mass hysteria in the vein of Twisted Metal, only about 100 times more brutal. The engine on this one is impressive; in fact, the whole game seems to be quite impressive, provided you like lots of slaughter. The only drag thus far is that every gang is way cool, except yours. The sluts in the dune buggies are more my speed. Pass the penicillin! *-DH*

Lethal Skies II

system: ps2 / **developer:** asmik ace / **publisher:** sammy studios / **available:** fall

Asmik Ace and Sammy Studios may have an ace in the hole, as the skies seem pretty clear of quality arcade-style flight sims on console these days. Lethal Skies II takes place in the year 20XX and blends science fiction with real-world applications, enlisting 19 planes (12 real-world and seven futuristic) in over 20 missions. You'll be flying sorties over a planet submerged in water, though—the result of the wars waged over the lost resources caused by global warming. Damn hairspray. *-DH*

Powerdrome

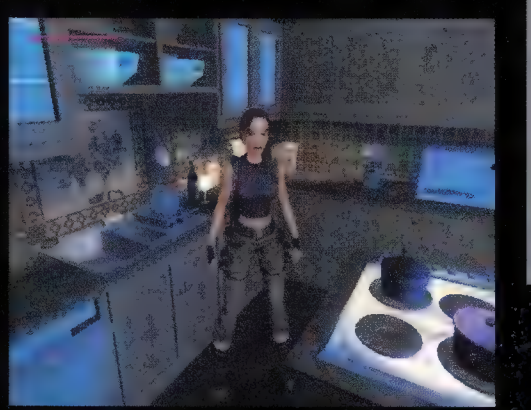
system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** argonaut / **publisher:** tba / **available:** winter

Argonaut have taken up the racing gauntlet and are crafting their futuristic speed demon (the successor to the Amiga and Atari ST games that started the genre) like no other. Don't look for any crutches like power strips, pick-ups or weapons in Powerdrome; the idea here is to connect the player with the pilot and vehicle to an extent never before achieved, providing a pure racing experience. If anyone can do it the inventors of the FX chip most certainly can. But, could you find a home for Malice first, please? *-DH*

Dark passages

Tomb Raider
Angel of Darkness

words dave halverson



Eidos was so afraid that the press was going to sabotage the new Tomb Raider they made us promise to hold reviews until Sevenoaks shows before they'd send us codes, then the next day, dropped a bit rebel... very un-Lara like. It's certainly didn't help; I came away perplexed by Lara's slow pace, thinking the engine must be somehow flawed, but sitting down with the game, realising it's merely paced to suit the action, I was happy to begin anew into the realm of Tomb Raider.

Initially I did have some real concerns: the game slowed down to an almost illegal pace within the context of the first mission, the new strength metric seemed a bit odd and the visuals seemed a tad dull. Well, perhaps a more appropriate title for it's installment would have been 'Tomb Raider: Restrained', because I've never been a game reviewer so much, so fast. My concerns soon melted away, replaced by the sense of adventure and intrigue that drew me to the series initially — elements that, since the original, had never fully returned. Angel of Darkness is a vintage Tomb Raider, laden with a comfort of story, handsome platforming (like you can't believe — thank you, Core), a darker environ, and above all, splendid visuals set to the almost constant hum of The London Symphony Orchestra. The attention to detail in the game's inner sanctums (lobs, offices, flats, etc.) is staggering, warm in synch with the majesty of its outdoor vistas and tombs, covered in studied stone, glistening marble and terrain so real it looks burnt-exposed. Water, fire, facial animation, the cut of hair and dust as they switch terrain are all paid the utmost attention to detail, and all of the models — environments or otherwise — are meticulously crafted. It is obvious what Core has been tinkering away at all these years. We shrill in Sony's Workshop (including the creation of this game) for a huge improvement of grade-animation animation, and here it is. Core has exploded, in fact, it's the best Core ever seen. It alone (may not) seriously cadence and animation be a lesson to the entire industry). Ms. Croft's movements: both new and old are smooth and graceful, and for the first time her assets are suitably animated. I waited a long time for those to move. The one element I'm somewhat put off by is Lara's newfound strength, or lack thereof. Oftentimes she will declare herself too weak to overcome an obstacle, then suddenly pose and discovers a moment piece of the puzzle, find the strength... It's a minor gripe, though, relief to have elements like most specific, specific to Angel of Darkness but the shooting and her new acrobatics, which are all masterfully integrated into the old-school Tomb Raider-cadence is no walk in the park. Lara also has a gauge that depletes whenever she is grappling, which is kind of like no more hanging around shopping for ammo... since these reorder items are free, it's bye-bye. But not to worry, you can save and pick up the fly, and leading is minimal.

Aside from random bouts of hard slow down (which subside greatly after act 1) there's little here not to celebrate. The story is brilliant, real time, and, and most specific, rules. The puzzles are sparsely sacked (Nature Child and Kurtis Trent, possibly the coolest bit player ever, design of Darkness is a bit in my book.

"Ms. Croft's movements: both new and old are smooth and graceful, and for the first time her assets are suitably animated."

Frequent Flier Philes

Freaky Fliers

words dave halverson

The bell tolls for kart racers past, stalled at trackside. I wasn't sure if I could stomach even one more token licensed character, once again master the power-slide or mow over a hodgepodge of power-up icons, looking for that elusive cheap win. Thankfully, with Freaky Fliers, I don't have to. Sure, it contains a spattering of genre staples, but that is where it begins, not ends. To assemble this cornucopia of comedy, blissful CG cinemas, gorgeous art and super-sized locales, Midway recruited Shiny alumni Kevin Munroe—the art director who created the story and characters for Shiny's underappreciated Wild 9—and has assembled a team with a deep-seated love for their craft...and giant breasts.

It's actually quite amazing how tight they've managed to keep the racing, given the expanse of the courses. Each massive artery is strewn with hidden sub-goals that introduce a kind of role-playing element to the game. On Danger Island, you might defeat the Sehag Sisters or return a gem to a monkey temple, or on Monster Island, kill rubber-suited monsters or fetch a robot its batteries; very freaky. There are six such sub-goals in each level, and every two levels are followed by not-so-mini mini-games. While nothing compares to the squeal of an airborne bandito with live rounds in his ass in "Bandito Attack," these get progressively more intense as the game moves along; they are not so "mini" as they are an integral part of the gigantic whole. There are really two ways to look at each race, as you can either play to win or play to discover, allowing you the joy of simply taking in all of the grand design and living aspects of each locale.

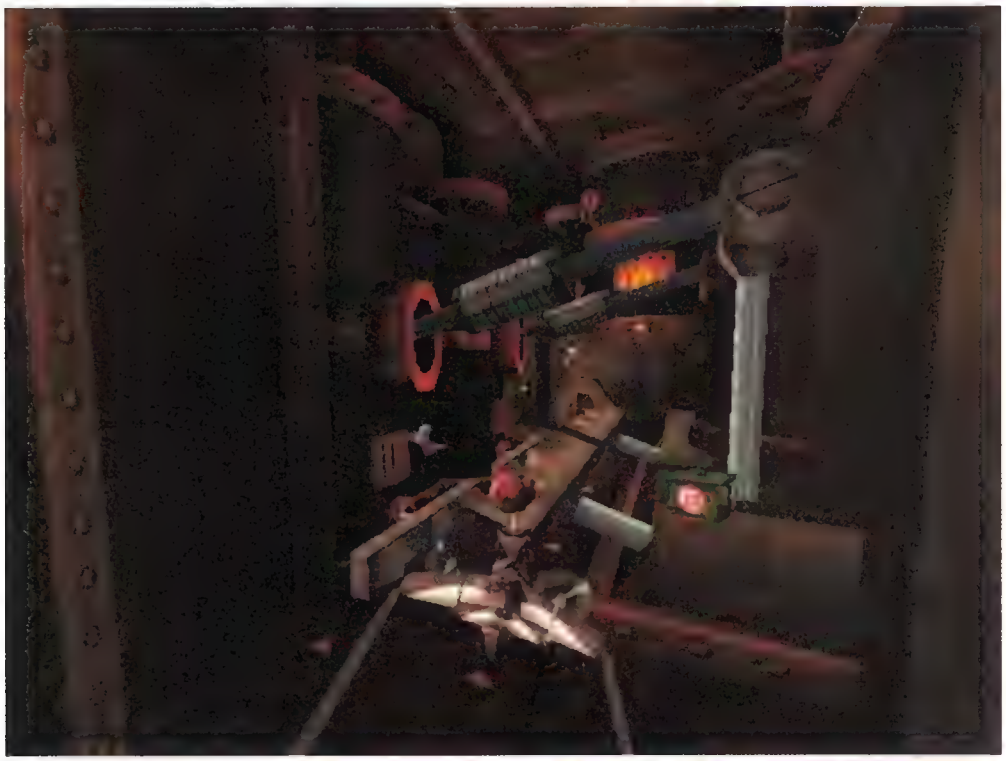
Sealing the deal on the entire universe, however, are the cut-scenes. There are few things as cool as seeing Kevin Munroe's character designs brought to CG life within the character-specific vignettes. Why it took so long for someone to integrate these elements into a genre that revolves around character attributes, I do not know. I am glad that FF is the first, though; its grown-up comedy and sex appeal definitely lend themselves to the antics. Together with a narrator that truly enhances the experience (making this the polar opposite of 90 percent of games with narrators), Freaky Fliers is like a comedy album, cartoon and racing-shooter, all wrapped into one tasty toon tortilla. The one fly circling hungrily over the ointment is the slight FPS hiccup in the PS2 and Cube versions. As usual, Freaky Fliers flies highest on Xbox.

system: ps2, xb, gc
developer: midway
publisher: midway
available: now

B

GameCube and PlayStation 2 versions receive a B- rating

"I wasn't sure if I could stomach even one more token licensed character, once again master the power-slide or mow over a hodgepodge of power-up icons..."



Pick up and delivery often factors into the action: where'd you say you were from?

interview

Kevin Monroe, Lead Artist

play: You've always done stunning work, but these kooks rank among your best. Did you come up with the characters and pitch them to Midway, or did they come to you with a concept?
KM: Thanks a lot! I came to Midway because I was pitched the brief idea of creating a flying racing game with a blonde American guy and a German woman with big...ambitions. From there, I pretty much went off and did all of the characters and storylines you see in the game today. I wanted to go for an anachronistic time period loosely set in World War II in an ode to The Great Race and Wacky Races...only with French Siamese-twin mimes.

Don't you think this brand begs for a Wacky Racers-style cartoon?
Tell me about it! I'm so frustrated with the world of video games and how there is this attitude that we have to depend on Hollywood to come and adapt our game properties for us into TV and film. In most everything I do, I try to create a property that can be ported across multiple media, be it action figures, comics, TV or film. With the right people working on it, there is no reason we can't do it all from ground zero. We're actually looking into TV and film opportunities for the project right now. Stay tuned!

Did you also write and produce the character vignettes?
Yeah—it was a pretty big effort. I brought in Randolph Heard—a writer friend who also wrote for the Tick series and Celebrity Death Match—to write it with. We ended up with a 150-page script. I storyboarded the whole thing and then directed the 90 minutes of FMV that we wound up doing at Brain Zoo Studios (formerly Dream Theatre). Those guys are absolutely amazing. They worked their tails off and the end result shows, even if you didn't know the ludicrously low budget we worked with!

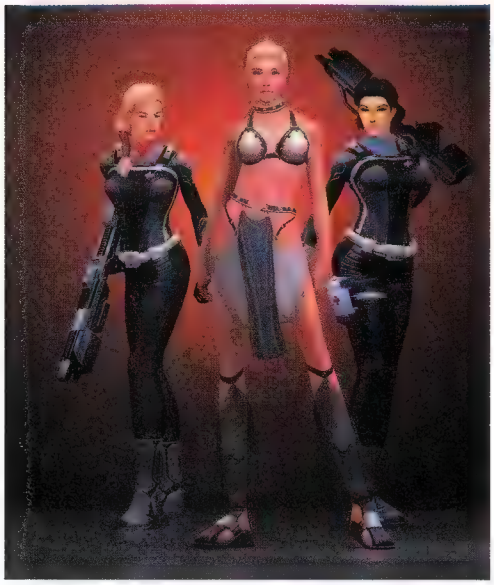
Give us your favorite female and male from the cast...and a brief explanation why.
FEMALE: No question—Myrna Bookbottom. I just have this thing for repressed, literate women. Would probably explain my wife.
MALE: Andre LaToilette—I love everything about this guy. He was somebody I just nailed with the first sketch. Everything from his enslaving of defenseless rodents to using them as ammo to his wooden plane that's powered by chainsaws...all wrapped up in maple-syrupy goodness.

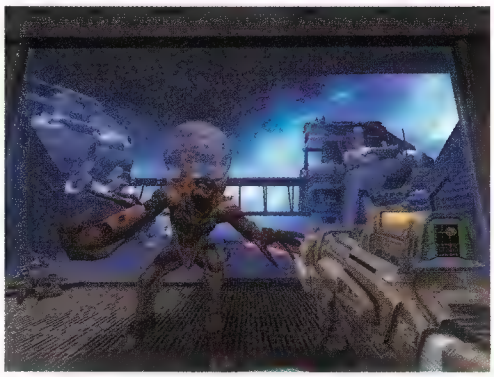
Kirk would be proud

Star Trek

Elite Force II

words michael eisenberg





After years of enduring numerous disappointing titles, Star Trek fans finally found a reason to cheer when Activision released Star Trek's very first first-person shooter, Star Trek: Voyager Elite Force, a few years back. Finally, repressed Trek fans were able to shoot first and negotiate later. Built around a hot-rodded version of the incredible Quake III engine, Elite Force did indeed deliver the goods, proving to be a first-rate shooter with only a couple of noticeable weak points.

Fortunately, the development team at Ritual Entertainment recognized the flaws in the old design and has brought forth an all-new and improved Star Trek: Elite Force II. Once again built on the sturdy but aging modified Quake III engine, EF2 looks graphically very similar to the original installment. If you're lucky enough to be gaming with a GeForce FX 5900 Ultra or a Radeon 9800 Pro, you may notice some minor lighting or texture improvements from the first game, but otherwise the graphics are exactly what you'd expect from a sequel using a slightly tweaked, but fundamentally identical, graphics engine. That said, EF2's environments are more interesting and diverse than in the original; what looked good in that game looks even better now.

Elite Force II picks up where the original left off. Once again in the role of Hazard Team leader Munro, you must find the source of a new alien threat and put a stop to it. As expected, you will encounter the usual contingent of increasingly difficult bosses, various puzzles, time-based missions and challenges involving obstacle navigation. While there's nothing more fun than massacring aliens in the name of the Prime Directive, if you're a Trek fan, you'll probably welcome the opportunity to explore the Enterprise and interact (in a limited way) with the ship's personnel including Captain Picard himself (voiced by Patrick Stewart)—something you get to do with a bit too much frequency. These pauses in the action would seem out of place in most other shooters, but here it's all very Star Trek-like, even if it isn't exactly exciting. After all, when else would we get to hear Picard, well, be Picard?

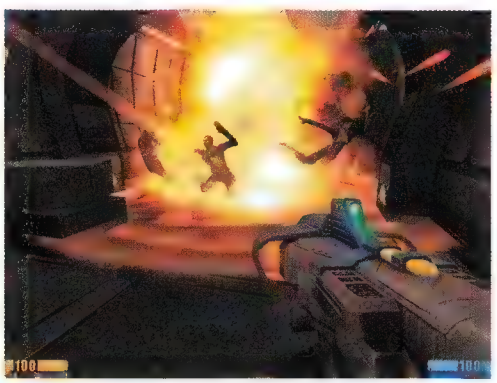
"This game just feels like Star Trek. Star Trek with big, death-dealing guns."

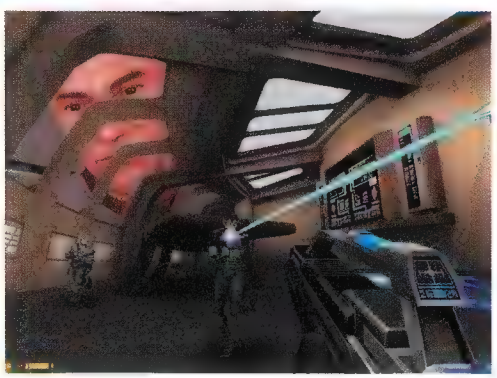
Sadly, the AI isn't what you would hope for in a game with squad-based combat; you often find yourself shooting your own teammates as they insist upon stepping in front of your line of fire. Additionally, although the game is by no means short at 70 levels, it's not as big as it sounds due to the fact that the levels seem to transition at an unusually rapid rate.

Elite Force II is certainly nothing groundbreaking—we'll have to wait for Doom III or Half-Life 2 for that—but it succeeds as a fun and generally above average first-person shooter. And while you do not have to be a Star Trek fan to enjoy Elite Force II, if you are, it should definitely be on your must-buy list. This game just feels like Star Trek. Star Trek with big, death-dealing guns. Star Trek that kicks some ass.

- **system:** pc
- **developer:** ritual ent.
- **publisher:** activision
- **available:** now

B+





Nothing screams with the fright of a Silent Hill

Silent Hill 3

words brady fiechter

Darkly perverse and hauntingly dark, stitched together with raw threads of a vile nightmare, Silent Hill 3 is horror gamemaking at its disturbing best. It plays off gruesome imagery to powerful effect, creating a sense of dread that hangs like an oppressive fog. There really is only one series to draw comparison, yet Resident Evil is Gothic elegance; Silent Hill 3 is the grace of the devil. The game's intent is to create a psychological landscape of fear and discomfort. There is a macabre artistry that just is not pleasant, and that's the point. It places you in a frame of mind, takes you to the edge without restraint.

The technical mastery behind the game is superb, joining the strength of the designer's creative touch with valuable elements like the way light creepily crawls around objects and carves out terrific shadows. In a game where atmosphere is the driving force, effective use of sound is also crucial. Here again the game comes up strong. There could have been more stretches of subtlety and reprieve, but Akira Yamaoka's unrivaled sense of structure and portent pumps even more fear into the heavy gloom.

Why do the walls bleed? Why are crumbling mannequins stuck behind concrete walls? Why are there grotesque creatures running around, screaming, resembling something from the living that's been turned inside out and dropped in a vat of acid? We almost don't want the answer, don't really even care at first, willingly sinking in the mire of the bizarre imagery. Heather, a 17-year-old girl confusingly lost in this portrait of nightmare, must discover the clues to find a way back to her reality, but even the clouded answers come gradually and with sparse reason.

Silent Hill 3 places more emphasis on its action than the previous games in the series, and this does occasionally undermine the psychological structure the team has so powerfully built. Monsters are aggressive, attacking in numbers, yet most the time Heather can run from the threat; too bad there had to be compromise and an overuse of confrontations. Quiet fear is true terror; loud suspense is a temporary rush.

Of course, every horror game must contain locked doors, riddles scribbled on walls and unusual objects, helpful devices lying on tables and stuck in rubble. This series continues to improve on the arbitrary nature of its puzzle solving, and the solutions to the many problems Heather comes across in her journey are never dull and will always serve a fairly interesting function. Given the delirious surrealism of the setting, nonsensical moments of discovery don't feel as random as they probably are. Yes, you can point to flaws, but it all blends together to give a humbling lesson to any other game out there attempting this style of experience.

Notice the opening title screen: limply hanging on opposite sides of the frame, backdropped by putrid decay, are two young girls in delicate dresses. They're cut off at the upper torso. Are we seeing dead bodies in a noose? It doesn't matter; it's what our minds create from that awful image that haunts. This carries throughout Silent Hill 3, wrapping the psychological straightjacket tighter and tighter. The game may not have the raw newness of Silent Hill, and there is an obvious lack of confidence in letting the images take complete control. For all the excess, there is still some holding back, and the game parts of Silent Hill 3 stick safely to convention. The story is thin and forced, far too self-aware of needing to be supernaturally spooky, and the voice acting is crap as usual. No matter: Silent Hill 3 leaves an awfully intense mark.

B+

play online

A new twist on a well-worn genre

PlanetSide

words tom hein

"PlanetSide is truly the next evolution in first-person shooters."

From the makers of the ever-popular EverQuest comes their latest massively multiplayer online game (and no, it's not an RPG). PlanetSide is truly the next evolution in first-person shooters. Much like the other games from Sony Online Entertainment, the world of PlanetSide is a persistent one, a world where thousands of players are playing at the same time, 24/7.

The primary focus of PlanetSide is teamwork, albeit on a much broader and more intricate scale than similar games like Rainbow Six and Counter-Strike. Where in other games, a couple of good players could carry the team to victory, PlanetSide requires every member to work together as a finely tuned instrument.

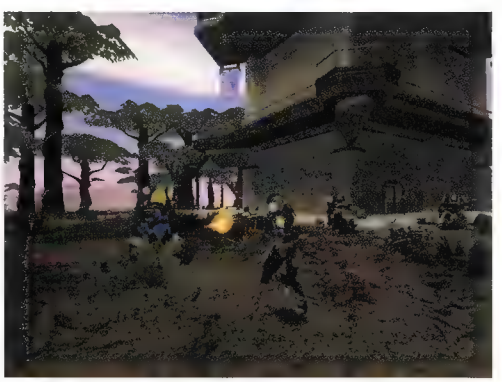
Set well into the future, players take on the role of a soldier in the midst of a power struggle between three factions: the Vanu Sovereignty, the New Conglomerate and the Terran Republic. Each faction has its own unique abilities and skills. Players pick which side to join based on their philosophies and beliefs. For example, the Terran Republic is all about strength in numbers. Their weapons tend to fire faster and their soldiers can adapt to almost any situation. The New Conglomerate's weapons may not fire as fast, but they pack a stronger punch. The Vanu Sovereignty may not be the strongest faction, but all of their weapons possess a built-in armor-piercing mode that makes them a formidable foe.

Unlike other FPS games where it's all about skill and timing, PlanetSide evens the playing field by implementing Certificates. During the game, as you kill enemies and effectively work with your team, you earn experience points and battle ranks. When you have accumulated enough experience points, you can purchase Certificates. Certificates are skills that allow you to use new equipment, weapons, vehicles and armor. You can't just pick up a fallen soldier's sniper rifle. You won't know how to use it unless you have the correct certifications. The true challenge of PlanetSide is not how good you are at shooting someone; that's secondary. What makes PlanetSide so compelling is it forces you to specialize. Sure, other games like Battlefield: 1942 have classes and specific roles, but PlanetSide takes it to a more detailed and involved level. If you're a Rambo-wannabe, don't bother playing PlanetSide. There are so many factors involved with taking over continents and bases; no one person can handle it all. Everything from sniping to hacking computers to stealth maneuvers to vehicle assaults—this is teamwork on steroids.

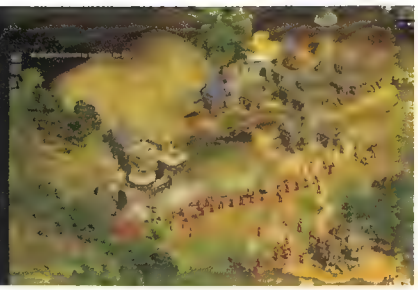
Although the graphics certainly do get the job done in PlanetSide, they just can't compare to current FPS games out on the market. Granted, the weapons models and environments look nice enough, but the character and vehicle representations are pretty lame. Like all games of this sort, performance and stability are always an issue. For the most part, our games were relatively lag-free; however, when the game did hit a snag, our gameplay screeched to a halt and at times was completely unplayable. Still, PlanetSide manages to deliver an addictive experience that is at times incredibly exhilarating and fun.

- **system:** pc
- **developer:** sony online ent.
- **publisher:** sony online ent.
- **available:** now

B+



game of the month



076 Rise of Nations

Quite possibly the best RTS to date.

The Italian Job

This ain't debatable: The Italian Job is far too short, clocking in at barely a few hours of play in the Story Mode. Too bad, because what's here can be high-energy fun as you speed crazily through decently rendered, wide-open Los Angeles streets, crashing and flipping and jumping ramps for big bonuses. The idea is to chase after stolen gold in hopes of stealing it back, and it doesn't matter how reckless your pursuit. Of course, the cops are on your tail and traffic is constantly a concern, but in the end, all you're concerned with is getting from A to B as fast as possible. There's also a racing and stunt mode thrown in to add to the replay, but this gets old quick. Given the competition, Italian Job stalls too quickly. *-BF*

• **system:** xbox • **publisher:** eidos
• **developer:** pixelogic • **available:** now

C+

Midnight Club II

Too fast? Too furious? Nah. I dig this game on many levels. First of all, it has attitude, with character designs that belong in some hardcore CG Rockstar movie somewhere. It's also the closest any of us will ever come to owning the streets. While I admit memorizing each circuit is a bit of a chore, I must concede, that is the nature of the beast, although, for my money, nothing beats a good freeway challenge. Flying through traffic surrounded by rivals with bad intentions as the chopper beam shines from the sky...that's LA livin'. The graphics at work here border on supernatural—clean yet not antiseptic, vivid, and lit like the streets at night really are. With the added dimension of Xbox Live, 480p, hi-def, and some of the most wicked replays around, this is more than a game yo, it's a parallel universe where tuning doesn't put you in the hole 'til you're pushing up daisies. Next time gimme some music other than hip-hop, and a driver's-eye view, and I'll be one happy speed freak. *-DH*

• **system:** xbox • **developer:** rockstar san diego • **publisher:** rockstar • **available:** now

B+

Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Op. Resurrection

I loved the Xbox Wolfenstein, but this slightly reworked version of the popular PC first-person shooter can't compare. Levels have been squeezed down a bit, and despite a new prologue, there is not nearly enough weight to the experience to be labeled a big success. But for all its shortcomings—poor sound quality, slightly off control, noticeable visual degradation—the game still plays fast and intense, showcasing excellent design and commanding atmosphere. As a bare-bones experience, Operation Resurrection belongs to the truest FPS fan. And honestly, without the Xbox version to compare, it comes off even better. *-BF*

• **system:** ps2 • **publisher:** activision
• **dev:** grey matter/raster prod. • **available:** now

B-

SX Superstar

I love the idea of the $29.99 video game, especially when they're brought off as well as this. Climax knows SXS is no Carmichael, but at the same time they've put together a nice-looking, deep and, more importantly, fun arcade-style MX racer. They've even plugged in a back-story where you set out on your own to carve a path through the world of non-sanctioned baja, MX, and enduro events, complete with apartment, fans, sponsors—the works. Too bad the dialogue is the hokiest fluff this side of Justin to Kelly. The control is simple yet fun and the tracks, consistently impressive. The graphics are on par with the best racers out there—although the riders have no sitting animation down straights and wheelies are impossible to control—but the real attraction here is the stickiness of the control and balance. *-DH*

• **system:** ps2, xbox, gamecube • **developer:** climax • **publisher:** acclaim • **available:** now

B

Downhill Domination

Few, if any, racing games kick as much ass as Downhill Domination; in fact, it's hard to believe it's running on the PS2. What Jak & Daxter and Ratchet & Clank are to PS2 action, this is to PS2 racing; it's just that good. Take everything you could possibly desire from a manic downhill assault and amplify it by 10. Features include fully upgradable everything from actual manufacturers, personalized racers—both male and female—with assorted gear, simple yet sophisticated controls, a full spectrum of available modes, and, of course, red-hot burning graphics and gameplay you simply will not believe. The deeper you go, the more nuanced the control becomes as the courses go from great to downright unbelievable. Incog have tuned the action in such a way that, like the best racers out there, it's as much about choosing lines and getting into the rhythm as it is dexterity. The end result is racing bliss, pure and simple. An absolute must-own PS2 game. *-DH*

• **system:** ps2 • **developer:** incog • **publisher:** scea • **available:** now

A

Dragon Ball Z: The Legacy of Goku II

It's no secret that The Legacy of Goku pretty much sucked, making this almost completely revamped sequel all the sweeter for the millions of DBZ fans out there who now write me daily to remind me that Roshi is not a pedophile...but that's another story. For starters, Goku takes a break in LoG II (which equates to a much better story arc) as Trunks, Vegeta, Piccolo and Gohan are all playable characters now. The audio is sweet too, from the DBZ theme to the sound effects, which are now (finally) yanked directly from the show. Graphically this is one of the most detailed top-down action/ RPGs in recent memory (although I do wish they'd have squeezed in a diagonal frame in the animation) and the gameplay, unlike previous efforts, is balanced for maximum enjoyment rather than max obliteration. To date, the essential DBZ game. Go Atari! *-DH*

B

Sonic Pinball Party

With its well-designed tables, wonderful music, excellent visuals, and of course the Sonic Team charm, Sonic Pinball Party is the most fun I've had playing video pinball since quite possibly ever. Though there are only three unique tables (plus minigames), the level progression and variety of modes kept me coming back for that elusive high score. The NiGHTS board alone makes it worth playing for diehard Sonic Team faithful, and makes me weep for the lack of said game on current consoles. *-CH*

• **system:** gba • **developer:** sonic team • **publisher:** sega • **available:** now

B+

Ultimate Muscle: Legends vs. New Generation

Ultimate Muscle is something like wrestling mixed with a quadruple espresso with extra caffeine. It's totally spastic, and not in a good Marvel vs. Capcom way, but rather in a button-mashing, uncontrollably random sort of way. Whether you consider it wrestling or fighting, it's dumbed down, with few moves and fewer options, while at the same time featuring unintuitive control. Toss in some ultra-cheesy voice acting (through straight from the cartoon) and the sorriest custom character mode ever and the result is a mid-card effort. *-CH*

• **system:** gc • **publisher:** bandai
• **developer:** aki • **available:** now

C

Evil Dead: A Fistful of Boomstick

There are those who would bag on ED: FoB for being a somewhat mindless shooting escapade, and indeed Ash sends zombie heads flying like Budweiser pop-tops at a tractor pull. Thing is, strapped to the State of Emergency engine and chock full of witty repartee, it works on a certain level; if only the game had a better soundtrack (much better), a more organic feel (it's very antiseptic), a strafe, a better flow and a tad more diversity. Ash looks great, and the lock-on works well, granting him the ability to fire like a madman, but when the story chimes in, the ancillary models look like blocks of wood, and the coolest hook, the Necrinomicon spells, takes way too long to charge up. Without any indication which to use where, you spend too much time running around killing to charge the gauge. At the end of the day, a good, albeit somewhat squandered, effort. *-DH*

• **system:** xbox • **publisher:** thq
• **developer:** vis • **available:** now

C

Rise of Nations

Veering away from your typical real-time strategy game is Big Huge Games' Rise of Nations. Showcasing a slick graphical design, incredible AI and 13 different multiplayer options, this latest from Microsoft Game Studios takes the torch from Command and Conquer: Generals as the best RTS to date. The brilliant Conquer the World mode will have armchair dictators throwing their fists in the air as they utilize new gameplay mechanics such as national borders, alliances and attrition. Combined with 18 genuinely unique nations, wickedly cool technologies and possible the best AI ever found in an RTS, you can load up Rise of Nations and forget about going out for a while. *-TH*

• **system:** pc • **publisher:** microsoft games
• **developer:** big huge games • **available:** now

A

Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb

Sprawling adventure games are too rare. Maybe my love for the genre allowed me to enjoy Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb more than I should have, because it is full of fatal flaws that just can't be ignored. The Xbox version ran smoothly, but there are times, especially during combat, when the game becomes unacceptably clunky. Think assembly line Tomb Raider, think little creativity: explore and platform—the best parts—discover artifacts and prosaically attack enemies. The puzzle side of the game leans on the generic, where switches get flipped and a nearby door opens. The look of the game has been downgraded since Xbox, but most disappointing, the drab use of color and flat architecture design show a basic lack of aesthetic awareness. *-BF*

• **system:** ps2 • **publisher:** lucasarts
• **developer:** the collective • **available:** now

C

RTX Red Rock

I offer you an RTX review having taken the time necessary to come to terms with its difficult menu system and collision mishaps. I'm now 103...just kidding. Although not perfect, the good far outweighs the bad in what has to be one of the best in-house action games LucasArts has ever produced. Being a game that I expected little from (it is, after all, original, without a Wookie in sight), RTX shocked me with its design, music, and especially story integration which borders on greatness. At its core, RTX plays very much like Metroid Prime, with vast labyrinthine networks to explore, solving puzzles to unlock their breadth and further the story. Door's locked? Hmmm...switch to the appropriate scan mode, and viola! I can shoot the lock off that air-vent grate...and so it goes. Equipped with a cybernetic arm with ports for a plasma cutter, taser, grappling hook and a torque wrench, and a robotic eye that can see in four spectral visions—Thermo-Scan, Navi-Scan, Electro-Scan and Bio-Scan—there's more to RTX RR then meets the eye (heh). The menus can be tricky, but this is one space ranger worth getting to know. He's got a hot virtual sidekick, and the adventure is brought off with mucho polish. *-DH*

• **system:** ps2 • **developer:** lucasarts • **publisher:** lucasarts • **available:** now

B+

Mega Man Network Transmission

I'm thrilled to see the cyberspace incarnation of Mega Man make the move from RPG to side-view platformer, and I'm also glad to see so much emphasis placed on the varied weaponry. What I'm not so excited about in Mega Man Network Transmission is the implementation; choosing from random weapons was fine in the GBA games, but it continuously works against you in the heat of side-scrolling combat. The result is a game that looks fantastic and has excellent level design but is ridiculously hard for the wrong reasons. *-CH*

B-

Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution

Look, how can you possibly pass up Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution if you love this series? Two new characters and refinements across the board make this the best VF to date, yet I've personally had enough—same goes for Tekken—and look at the game as a casual diversion rather than a fighter I want to spend months picking apart. Move lists have been altered enough to addict the hardcore audience all over again, and the options and extra features exceed all VFs before it. To me, the most worthy new addition is the involving new Quest Mode. Here, you battle it out in virtual arenas, finding new opponents and raking in all sorts of winnings. I beg for a complete shakeup for this series, but for now, a fine polish will have to do. *-BF*

• **system:** ps2 • **developer:** am2 • **publisher:** sega • **available:** now

B

Madden NFL 2004

words tom ham

Going into its 14th season, Madden NFL Football 2004 is almost ready to be unleashed into the mainstream. With improved visuals (if you can believe that), a brand new Owner Mode and EA Sports Online competition, this next Madden football game is shaping up to kick some major ass when it comes out next month.

One of the biggest additions to Madden NFL 2004 is the new Owner Mode. Where in Franchise Mode you managed every aspect of your team (including management, rookies, free agents, created players, coaching, etc.), in Owner Mode, you control EVERYTHING. So in addition to your normal Franchise Mode duties, you're now responsible for relocating your team, building a new stadium, setting ticket prices, controlling prices for concessions, souvenirs, parking…and the list goes on and on. With the addition of the Assistant Coaches license, players can even hire their own coaching staffs.

Another key new feature is Playmaker Control. Now you can control the players on the field before and during the play. Utilizing the right analog stick, players can quickly change plays, pick alternate routes and change defensive coverage. After the ball is snapped, players can use the right stick to call out blocks, direct receivers and adjust the defensive line. This feature alone is going to change the level of online competition—it's going to be out of control.

Something fun in Madden NFL 2004 is the Stadium Builder. Here players can use graphical tools and build their dream stadium. Not only can you decide where the scoreboard is going to go, you can decide what kind of scoreboard. You can pick where the tunnels are or where to put the luxury boxes. There are over 17 billion possible combinations.

When you combine all of this with better graphics, presentation and sound (and the EA Sports Bio), it's really hard to imagine another football game taking down Madden NFL 2004. But this is only a taste of what's to come; I'll have my full football round-up next issue.

- **system:** ps2, xb, gc
- **developer:** ea tiburon
- **publisher:** ea sports
- **available:** fall

A good idea of the kind of close-up detail we can look forward to in Madden NFL 2004

"With improved visuals, a brand new Owner Mode and EA Sports Online competition, Madden NFL 2004 is shaping up to kick some major ass."

Wakeboarding Unleashed Featuring Shaun Murray

words tom ham

Wakeboarding Unleashed is one of those games that you think is going to totally suck when you plop it in, but after you spend some quality time with it, it becomes your new best friend. Sure, the fine sport of wakeboarding may not be as popular as skateboarding, BMX or snowboarding, but Wakeboarding Unleashed offers enough gameplay and fun to make it worth checking out.

What exactly is wakeboarding? Probably the best way to describe it is a combination of surfing and water skiing. You stand atop a small board while being pulled by a boat via a rope. Unlike surfing, where you perform tricks and fancy moves from actual waves, in wakeboarding, you use the wake created by the boat in front of you.

The heart and soul of Wakeboarding Unleashed is the Career Mode. Here, players go from level to level and complete various challenges. Challenges range from your basic score goals to more complex trick objectives. As you successfully complete your tasks and earn the points, different areas of the game become unlocked. Sure, the formula is tried and true, but it works. Wakeboarding Unleashed also has a brilliant multiplayer mode where one person controls the boat and the other rides the wakes—without a doubt, definitely one the game's strongest components.

But what sets Wakeboarding Unleashed apart from similar games like Tony Hawk is how it goes beyond the typical flips, grinds and tricks. The game does this by giving players control of the boat's towrope. With a single press of a button, players can drop the towrope and go off to do their own thing. This really opens up certain areas of a level, letting players go where the boat could not. Before long you'll be grinding off other boats and even roofs of buildings. But there is one caveat. When the boat is not pulling you, your speed significantly drops. So the challenge here is to perform several tricks and then catch up with the boat to grab the towrope again. When you get the groove, it's really quite exhilarating.

Visually, Wakeboarding Unleashed is a mixed bag. Although the water doesn't look quite like the real thing, the physics of it all is incredibly real and convincing. The wake and the water splashes are dead on. And although the various animations for the tricks are very well done, the textures for the buildings are a little on the drab side. When you compare the two platforms, the Xbox version is a little cleaner than the PS2 version. But we all know that's to be expected.

- **system:** ps2, xb
- **publisher:** activision
- **developer:** shaba studios
- **available:** now

B+

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Originality plus good execution equals fun!

NASCAR Thunder 2004

words tom ham

At this year's E3, amidst all the hoopla surrounding top-tier racing games like Gran Turismo 4 and Project Gotham Racing 2, surprisingly, EA Sports managed to make some noise on their own with one of their racing games, NASCAR Thunder 2004. Yeppers, that's right, K-Mart shoppers, NASCAR Thunder 2004.

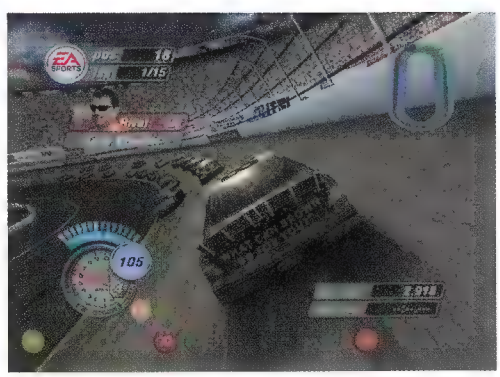
But in all seriousness, NASCAR Thunder 2004 is going to take NASCAR games to the next level. Why, you ask? The most competitive AI ever for a NASCAR game. The name of the game is intense rivalry and NASCAR Thunder 2004 incorporates a revolutionary grudge/alliance system that brings the drama and intensity of NASCAR racing right into your living room. So if you'd like to bump the driver in front of you or push a car up into the wall, you'd better think twice before you pick up the controller with NASCAR Thunder 2004, because now, all of your actions will have repercussions.

Now we've seen this sort of behavior before in other NASCAR and racing games, but EA Sports is taking it up a notch. So take, for example, the biggest wiener in NASCAR, Jeff Gordon. At the start of the race, you immediately start to bump him – you even try to run him off the road. Now if you look at his car on the track, it will have a flashing red icon above it. That means he's now holding a grudge and will do whatever he can to get back at you. And what's cool is that it doesn't stop after your current race. It will carry over into other races. When will it stop? You'll never know. Maybe he'll back off the next race and then come back a couple of months later with a vengeance. This added level of realism makes for some of the most intense races I've ever had with a NASCAR game.

What's also cool about NASCAR Thunder 2004 is the ability to build alliances as well. Players build alliances by skillfully managing sponsors, teams and garages. Teammates will not only block for you but they will create paths for you to drive through. So remember pissing off Jeff Gordon? He's not a worry now; your teammate is going to block him the whole race.

Other features for NASCAR Thunder 2004 include 23 Winston Cup tracks, 11 fantasy tracks, 70 drivers and over 175 authentic car skins. Players can even race with full 43 car packs including Winston Cup, Busch and legend drivers.

- **system:** ps2, xb
- **publisher:** ea sports
- **developer:** ea tiburon
- **available:** fall



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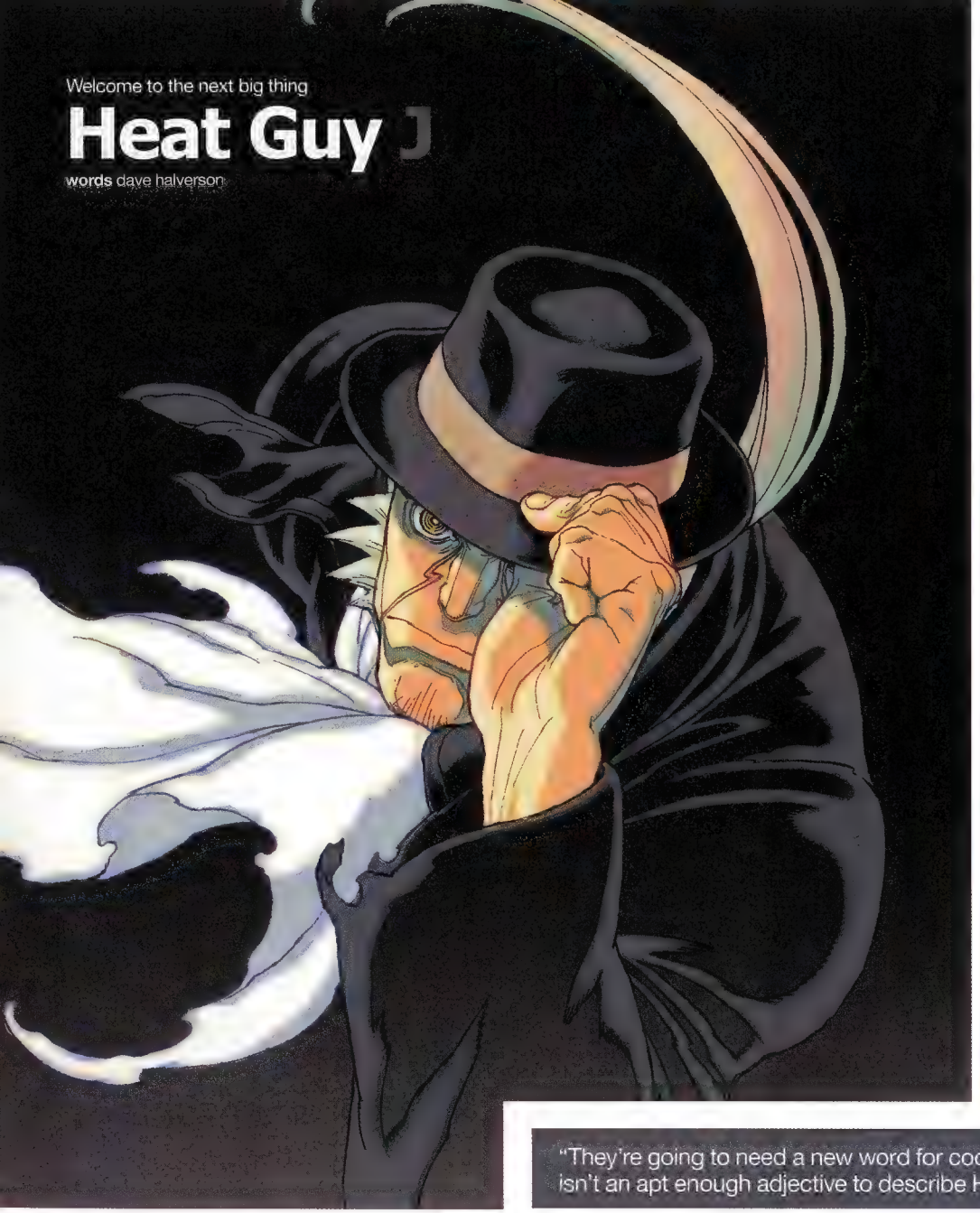
Welcome to the next big thing

Heat Guy J

words dave halverson



"They're going to need a new word for cool, because it just isn't an apt enough adjective to describe Heat Guy J."

They're going to need a new word for cool, because it just isn't an apt enough adjective to describe *Heat Guy J*. I didn't think it was possible to out-cool *Cowboy Bebop*, and I know crucifixion is at hand for my saying so, but I think *Heat Guy J* may just be cooler... Of course, only time will tell. One thing is for sure: anime the likes of J remain a phenomenon, displaying a style so far beyond that of any filmed entertainment in the west that it seems to exist on a plane of its own. Where do these guys get this stuff? Pixar could spend a trillion dollars and never even come close to this level of suave and technique.

In the vein of primetime cop dramas (only not phoned-in and dull), *Heat Guy J* is a crime action/drama set in a future where android technology has become commonplace. Gambling is to-the-death and a spectator sport, communication is instantaneous and firearms have (finally) been outlawed; otherwise, life is pretty much as is. The fossil fuels of our generation also long gone, androids run on steam, and it is in a cloud of vapor we meet J, a very special android built by the government to team up with special agent Daisuke "Dice" Aurora in a special task force established to pre-empt crime in Judoh city. Inevitable parallels seep in—in a possible Robocop homage, J has a sexy doctor that cares for him, and like Spike from *Bebop*, Dice is an über-cool human, living larger than life in a world filled with altered beasts—that then dissipate; *Heat Guy J* is a highly original work.

This being the first volume, things unfold in pseudo-introductory fashion, engraving the players into our minds while lighting the fuse on several solid story arcs—the first being the resident Mafia. As things get underway, the don of the Leonelli family, which lords over the eight crime families that control organized crime in the city, has died, leaving his empire to his son, Claire, a vile, cruel, but charismatic vampire with a pierced lip, a penchant for high explosives, and a kill-first, ask-questions-later attitude. Of course, he wants J dead ASAP, so he can reign supreme. Elsewhere, we discover how wired Dice is to the rhythm of the city, from the food district to the working girls to the Shogun, a wise man that seems the buffer of all things Judoh. The relationship between Dice and J is established as somewhat precarious and bittersweet. J would sacrifice anything for him and vice-versa, but there is underlying tension: Dice's parents were killed by an android.

In between, we're treated to glimpses of the fantastic universe the creators have laid as their playground, dotted with memorable fight scenes (J in action is nothing short of awesome) and the single coolest hybrid means of transportation since Cloud Strife's Hardy Daytona. Although the Judoh underbelly is only beginning to emerge, its uniqueness abounds: prisoners sentenced to 100 years or more are altered, fitted with beast heads to mark them forever should they escape; immigrants with "business" always bring an android to play with J; almost everyone seems "altered" in some way; police are allowed one firearm, which must be signed out along with three regular bullets and one special red tip; and the Mafia is deep, strong and brutal. The layers of city government and the citizens also seem somehow connected to the streets, and the real police aren't all that fond of J and the Special Unit. Each plot line builds on a foundation that by episode four is virtually bursting with intrigue...and then there's the look of it all. This is one of the most innovative and beautiful anime I have ever seen. The animators have combined digital animation with panning diorama and cel-shaded CG to a stunning end. All three techniques are taken to their extremes, and filmed in such a way that the look is simply breathtaking—and then they've gone and produced a soundtrack to match (which will be available August 5).

So far this summer, I've seen *X2, Matrix Reloaded* and *The Hulk*, and honestly, none of them even hold a candle to what is on display here. All the money in the world cannot replace that which is cooler than cool. This is entertainment.

A

It is said that each generation of Muramasa swordsmiths creates one weapon so powerful that it spawns a legend of its own. These cursed weapons have haunted the Tokugawa clan for three generations, and now one of them serves as the prize for the Shogun's tournament. Benitora enters to prove his independence from the Tokugawa family, but his first opponent is none other than Demon Eyes Kyo. Even though he is over-matched, Benitora swears to fight to the finish against Kyo's Red Mirage: an attack that turns the target's inner demons against him.

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Where art thou brother?

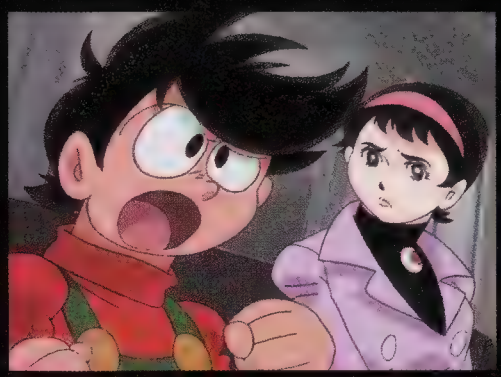
Android Kikaider

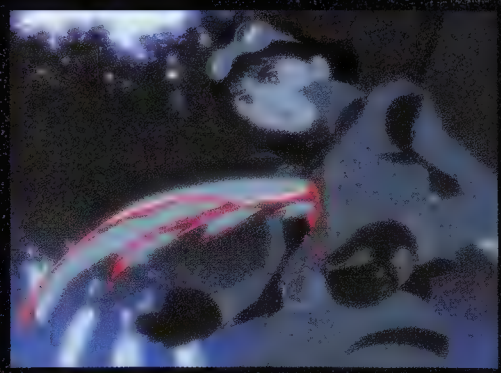
If there's one thing the world doesn't need, it's another run-of-the-mill transforming hero to beat down crime; thankfully, that's not what *Android Kikaider: The Animation* is. This oft-visited series is back again, this time at its manga best, fitting anime whether you've been down this road or not. Enter one Dr. Komyoji: Geppetto meets Dr. Frankenstein. Komyoji is on the brink of breathing life into his ultimate creation—an android boy able to think, feel and mature emotionally like a real human boy via his proprietary conscience circuit "Gemini." Just as the flicker of life is at hand, Komyoji discovers a problem with his new creation just as Professor Gill, leader of DARK (bent on destroying Gemini) decides to crash the party. The aftermath is not pretty. Kikaider, aka Jiro, is born into the world alone with a major identity crisis, a guitar and unbelievable strength, thus branding him a freak.

Struggling to fit into a world he doesn't understand, he is eventually discovered by Komyoji's daughter, Mitsuko, and her little brother, Masaru, devastated by the loss of their father. But it's too early for any happy endings; trouble is afoot, or rather, a flute. Just when things begin to come into focus, Mitsuko discovers that the Gemini circuit was not quite ready for prime time, and as a result, Jiro may not be able to distinguish between right and wrong, which, given his strength, could prove disastrous. Things get darker further still when Gill begins tooting a magic flute that sends Jiro into a Hulk-like rage, almost killing Mitsuko. Fearing termination, Jiro leaves the only family he's ever known and sets out into the cruel world, dogged by Gill's arachnid androids at every turn. It's a little *Pinocchio*, a little *Frankenstein* and a little *AI*, all rolled into one stunningly vivid animated package. Sure, his clothing and guitar suffer the same conundrum as Hulk's pants, but such is the nature of transformation.

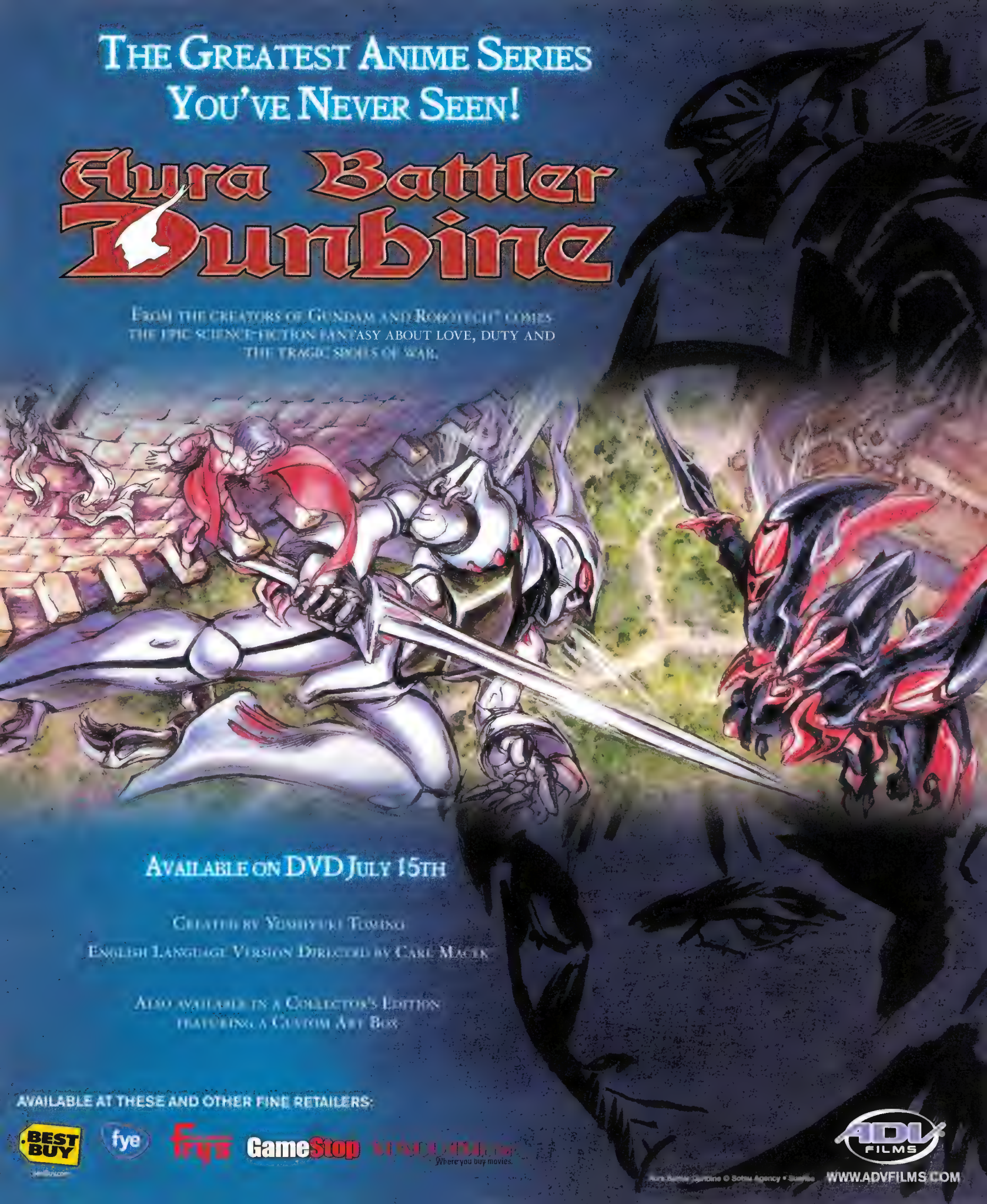
The story here is intriguing, at times almost mesmerizing (if not a little slow paced) and very bittersweet, as Mitsuko and Masaru throw themselves between DARK and Jiro—with a little help from the cool but kooky PI Hanpei Hattori—looking to hold onto their father's lost dream. What really keeps everything afloat is a super-cool '70s retro feel and Naoyuki Konno's character design (*Bubblegum Crisis, AD Police*), which has suddenly adopted a sort of Leiji Matsumoto (Capt. Harlock) quality with maybe a hint of Miyazaki, circa *Lupin*. If that sounds like a resounding recommendation, mission accomplished.

B





"What really keeps everything afloat is a super-cool '70s retro feel and Naoyuki Konno's character design."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Full Metal Panic

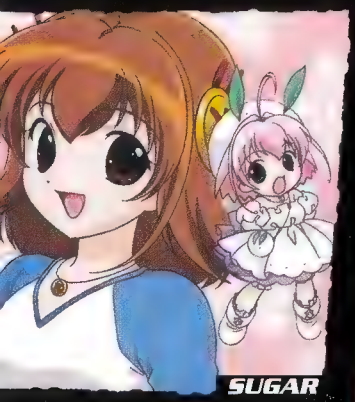
words dave halverson

Although every time I look at Sousuke Sagara I get a *Gatekeepers* flashback (Gonzo is just so…Gonzo), I found *Full Metal Panic* stunning in all of its initial simplicity. Judging by the previews, I was looking for something more along the lines of some of the deeper *Gundam* works, but this suits me just fine: a high-school hijinks meets covert ops adventure/comedy. Sousuke works for Mithril, an anti-terrorist organization whose current mission is protecting girls who are "Whispered," a genetic disposition that allows the initiated to access "black technology," which we know is key in national security, but not so much why or how just yet. Currently, Mithril's focus is on protecting one Kaname Chidori, a Whispered girl likely next on the KGB's most wanted list. Sousuke and two operatives—the bold, brash Kurz Weber and the sexy Sergeant Major Melissa Mao—are sent in to stake out the situation. Mao and Kurz take snoop duty with Sousuke (who's wound tighter than spandex on a rhino), assuming the role of a new student at Kaname's school…where Kaname happens to be Reese Witherspoon in *Election*. The hook is that Kaname doesn't know she's Whispered, just that whoever this new freak is in school dogging her every move is real pain. Kurz stakes out the situation in a cloaked mech (called Arm Slaves for these proceedings) while Melissa serves as their superior, calling the shots. The first three episodes are highly comedic as Sousuke bumbles and fumbles with civilian life. He's hardcore military through and through, and throws himself into protecting Kaname so vehemently he puts himself and pretty much any nearby student at risk. Just before things turn serious, he's caught with Kaname's panties, officially nabbing top spot on her shit list—then we go from *Porky's* to *Die Hard*. Enter terrorist goons, and all of the sudden a plane carrying the entire class is hijacked and then set to detonate, Kaname is kidnapped and Sousuke begins to come unraveled for the first time in his military life, putting the entire operation at risk...very cool stuff. Unfortunately, that's where the action freezes on an *Alias*-style cliffhanger.

Full Metal Panic is a sparkling production, richly colored, awash with CG touches that never seem garish, dynamite character design (Kaname is, without a doubt, the sexiest 16-year-old ever conceived) and plays amidst a cast that harnesses the charm of *Nadesico* with the modern trappings of series like *Gatekeepers* and *Hellsing*. Moreover, once again—and they are making a habit of this—ADV's English script and voice talent are superb, reaching beyond mimic to production values akin to American cinema: the right stuff at the right time.

B+

"Enter terrorist goons, and all of the sudden a plane carrying the entire class is hijacked and then set to detonate."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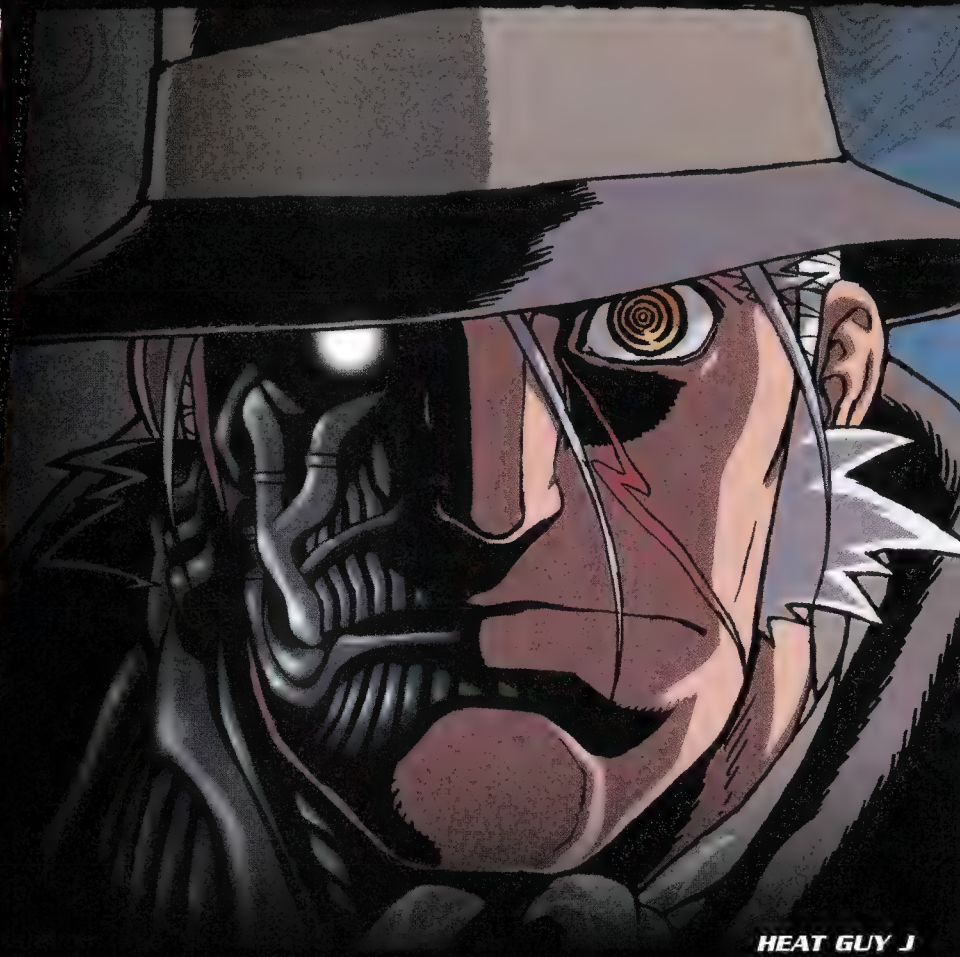
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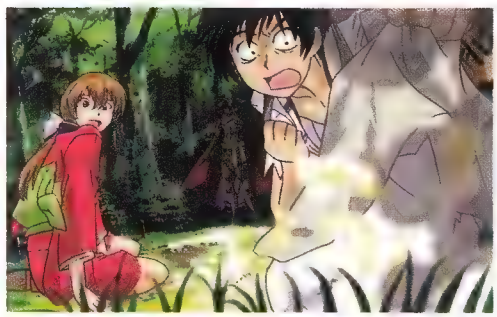

"SDK is a profound samurai action/drama with a nostalgic old school feel complete with mutating monsters."

The eyes have it

Samurai Deeper Kyo

words christina alexander

Lately there've been a few rumors that after the recent and mammoth success of *Kenshin*, Anime Works has simply procured a clone of the ever-popular RK in an attempt to repeat its samurai success. So let's just head that ridiculous assumption off right now. The only two things that Rurouni Kenshin and Samurai Deeper Kyo have in common are swords and the letter K. Beyond that, the similarities are few and far between.

SDK is a profound samurai action/drama with a nostalgic old school feel complete with mutating monsters. Think *Guyver*. Kyo loosely bases itself on Japanese non-fictional events of pre-industrial feudal Japan: The battle of Sekigahara and the creation of the infamous Tokugawa Shogunate to be more precise. During the battle of Sekigahara, two elite samurai, Lord Kyoshira and Demon Eyes Kyo, fight each other in a duel to the death. However, their fight is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a shooting star that crashes to earth and presumably devours the two opponents. Years later, Kyoshira is found to be wandering as a carefree medicine man with a dark secret. He soon discovers that his enemy, Demon Eyes Kyo, is not dead, but merely dormant and trapped inside Kyoshira's own body.

If *Samurai Deeper Kyo* draws any parallels to past anime, it would be most akin to *Bastard*. Like the older Pioneer release, this anime features a rude, irreverent, and ridiculously powerful antagonist turned protagonist. Demon Eyes Kyo's imprisonment inside the body of his enemy simply smacks of Dark Schneider's own strange predicament. But don't mistake *SDK* for a clone of anything. It retains its own unique mysterious storyline, and historically prominent characters. These first few episodes are more than a little tight-fisted with the information, which, luckily, only makes this series that, much more intriguing. I get the feeling that the surface of his violent and instantly appealing samurai series has barely been scratched.

B+

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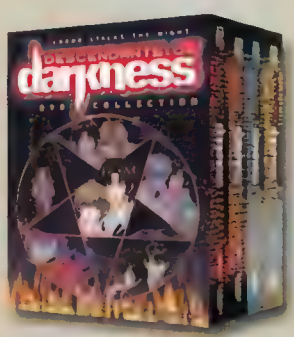

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Virtua Fighter: Round One vol.1

"Think of just about any anime cliché and it's probably in here. About the only banality that seems to be missing from *VF* is a magical girl."

If there is ever a point in my life when I find myself at the foot of a great omnipotent oracle ready to find out the secrets of the universe, the first question out of my mouth will be…why is it that we can put a man on the moon but we can't create a halfway-decent fighting-game-to-anime translation? Evidently all the planets have to be in alignment for this particular Holy Grail to appear.

Following in the grand tradition of anime like *Tekken, Street Fighter 2V* and *Battle Arena Toshinden*, *Virtua Fighter* is yet another lesson in what not to do. The VF anime is what I like to call one-dollar anime. Kinda like one-dollar Chinese food. It looks old, greasy and more often than not it sends you running for the restroom. *Virtua Fighter* comes standard with uninspired art, aging animation, and generic '80s-style synthesizer music. But wait! There's more. You also receive, at no extra charge, absolutely no plot to speak of. And, if one peeks at the back of the DVD case, it's evident that the people at Anime Works couldn't find the AWOL plot either.

This clearly low-budget production features Akira Yuki and young Pai as the heroes who seem to be battling a mysterious gang of thugs who seem intent on taking Pai back to her home country against her will.

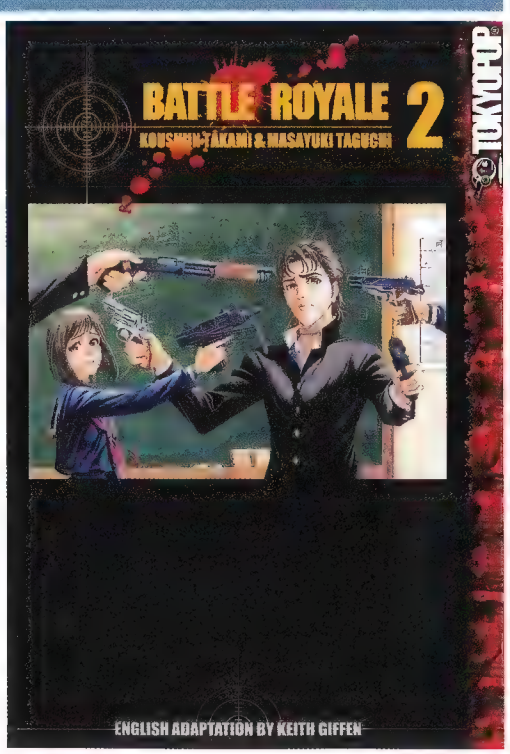
The real problems with *VF* lie in the fact that there simply isn't a single original bone in the proverbial anatomy of this anime. Think of just about any anime cliché and it's probably in here. About the only banality that seems to be missing from *VF* is a magical girl.

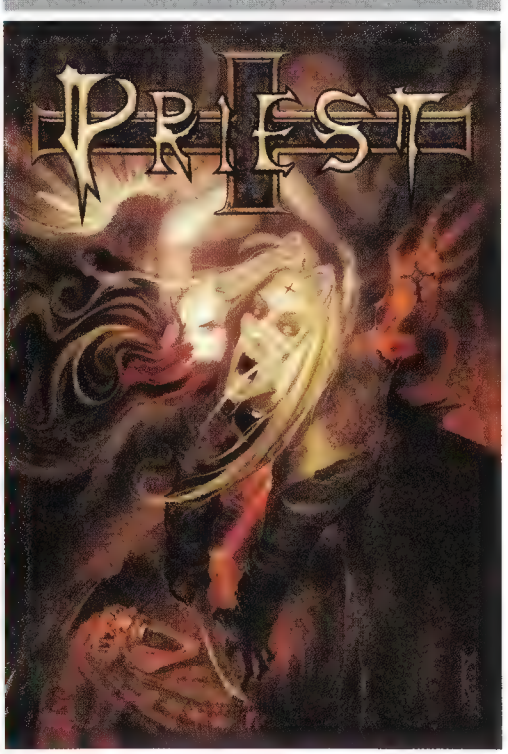
Japanese animation has made such unbelievable leaps and bounds in its evolutionary history. From *Robotech* to *Read or Die*, it just seems to get better and more imaginative with each passing year. That's why it's so sad to see bad productions like this that are clearly made for the less discerning anime fan. Remember, bad anime is not a victimless crime.

CHRISTINA ALEXANDER

D

Read Me File





Feel like crossing the line, perhaps taking in something of such magnitude that the pages actually jump into your head? Look no further. Run, don't walk, to your nearest book dealer and feast your senses on *Battle Royale*, based on the live-action feature film that sent shock waves through Japan and the underground DVD world. The grittiest, most shocking future tale ever laid down in ink, this futuristic reality show gone completely insane crushes every taboo and shatters the basic moral code—a truly stunning read. While you're at it, Priest is heading into its third volume and is equally intoxicating. If you like Spawn, Priest will open your eyes to a similar, albeit far more symbolic and mature, universe about fallen priest Ivan Isaacs. Isaacs sells his soul (well, half of it anyway) to the devil, Belial, for the power to fight evil in his pilgrimage for humanity's redemption and, should fate allow, everlasting life with his slain beloved. Also look for the Priest action-RPG coming soon to PC.

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Reign - on vol. 3

King Phillip is dead and Alexander reigns, but there are those in Athens and Macedonia who would betray him—a highly risky venture. Elegantly brutal, Peter Chung's character designs (*The Animatrix, Aeon Flux*) combined with the talents of some of Japan's most renowned producers, including the legendary Rintaro, is an anime spectacle not to be missed. After three volumes, *Reign* shows no signs of wavering in its grand telling of one of the greatest historical/mythological tales ever.

A-

Brigadoon - on vol. 2

Try this one on for size. Little tenement girl Marin Asagi, age 13, who likes to carve wishes in sacred trees and daydream about death, is being targeted by an alien horde that falls from the sky and manifests itself like giant killing toys, until she finds a little blue bottle that hatches into Melan Blue, her robotic protector. After that, things get really weird. Too cute, too surreal, too fruity...too cool.

B

Z.O.E. Dolores, i - on vol. 5

Z.O.E. is almost a wrap. The Links family ties, bound by iron will, more than a few six packs, and, of course, Dolores the (weird) Orbital Frame, continue to vacillate as Mars plunges into war. Sometimes together, sometimes apart, but always fighting the odds, one thing they are not is predictable. It remains to be seen whether a mild-mannered space trucker can save Mars (hey, Arnold did it), win back his kids' trust and get the girl, but it's only been mildly entertaining since the drop off after volume two.

C+

Wild Arms - on vol. 4

Although mid-budget, *Wild Arms* is overflowing with neo-western flare and a penchant for the bizarre: take episode 14, for example, when a fat old count pays off Mirabelle's parents for her hand in marriage. Sound harmless? She's like 16, and half vampire bat. Not to worry, though, Mom and Dad turn into little fruit bats too, and like the taste of Sheyenne's blood so much they decide to go for the plasma over the money and turn the tables on Count Pedophile. Soon after, the search for Sheyenne's real body continues. I think I need to play this game again.

B-

"STUNNING AND BEAUTIFUL... ASTONISHING FROM START TO FINISH" - ANIME INSIDER

FROM THE CREATORS OF "BLOOD THE LAST VAMPIRE"

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Available June 24TH

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DIRECTOR: KANJI WAKABAYASHI EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: RYUZO SHIRAKAWA, MITSUHISA ISHIKAWA ORIGINAL CREATOR: PRODUCTION I.G PRODUCTION: ANIPLEX INC. PRODUCER: KATSUJI MORISHITA CHARACTER DESIGN: SHO-U TAJIMA SCRIPT: NOBUTOSHI TERADO ANIMATION DIRECTOR: KYOUJI ASANO COLOR DESIGN: NAGISA ABE 3D DIRECTOR: MAKOTO ENDOH 2D WORKS: TSUKASA KAKIZAKAI FILMING: NATSUKO MORI SOUND DIRECTOR: KEIICHI MOMOSE MUSICAL SCORE: YOSHIHIRO IKE TITLE MUSIC: YUTAKA FUKUOKA ANIMATION PRODUCTION: PRODUCTION I.G

DVD

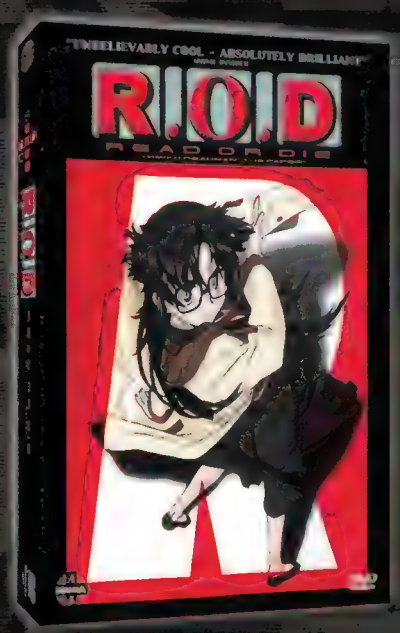
Clouds leave no trace in the sky, so fragile, just like my being

"EXQUISITELY ANIMATED, BITTERSWEET AND POWERFUL - KAI DOH MARU WILL LEAVE YOU SPELLBOUND" - PLAY MAGAZINE

Set in the political intrigue of Japan's Heian era, explosive action, intertwined with a complex human drama, is brought to life in this atypical story of love, honor, jealousy and betrayal. Produced by the incomparable animation teams from Japan's IG Plus / Production I.G (BLOOD: THE LAST VAMPIRE / GHOST IN THE SHELL), this fully digital animation tour de force features elaborately drawn 3D backgrounds, showcasing a unique colorization scheme reminiscent of Japanese artwork from the period. **Kai Doh Maru** masterfully explores new and uncharted dimensions of anime, taking you back in time to a distant past, a beautiful and deadly world of lavish luxury, mind altering mysticism and bloody conflict.

Bonus program includes the **Kai Doh Maru - Production Report**, detailing the intricate and articulate creation of this remarkable film.

"UNBELIEVABLY COOL... ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT" - ANIME INSIDER



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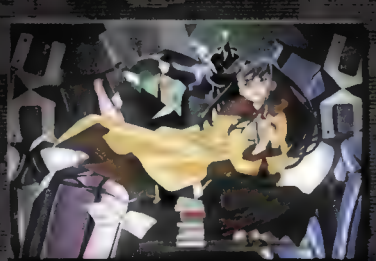

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Capcomics Zone: Dreamwave and Capcom unite

Comics based on video games are nothing new. Over the years, we've seen Mortal Kombat, Resident Evil, Tomb Raider, Sonic and many, many more. But when Dreamwave—the Canadian studio that really turned heads with its Transformers revival in 2002—announced five new comics based on Capcom properties, it was as if the sub-genre had experienced a rebirth. For one thing, Dreamwave has proven very impressive thus far turning established names into smash successes, and for another, the manga-style artwork looks simply phenomenal and true to the games. Aside from the titles previewed in these pages—Mega Man, Devil May Cry, Maximo, Rival Schools and Darkstalkers—Dreamwave has a 2004 "Capcom Versus Calendar" scheduled for release in October, and a few more video-game related projects up its sleeve. We checked in with the minds behind the pages to see what we can expect from this potential dream match. Next month we'll check back with Brad Mick, writer on Devil May Cry, and Michael Fong, the artist behind Mega Man.

words chris hoffman

Part 1

Interview

Pat Lee // Dreamwave founder and Devil May Cry artist

play: How did this collaboration between Dreamwave and Capcom come about?
Pat Lee: After our success on the nostalgic property licenses, we had interest in pursuing video game licenses that were in production or, shall I say, still in production. Devil May Cry was such an interesting concept and I felt that if it was turned into a comic book, we would be able to do it some justice artistically and story-wise. So, Dreamwave confronted Capcom about the possibilities of obtaining DMC. We did some samples for Capcom and they wrote back and told us how they liked it. Since we were in discussions with them with one property, we had huge fans here of other Capcom properties such as Mega Man, Darkstalkers, Rival Schools, Maximo, Powerstone and other affiliated titles. Basically, we picked up all the titles as fans, and we wanted to continue telling those stories from the more nostalgic Capcom properties and elaborate more on the new Capcom titles.

Obviously you're a big video game fan and a big Capcom fan. What are some of your favorites?
I'm a huge fan of DMC, which is the reason why I acquired the rights for it, but I am also a huge fan of Mega Man and I have been playing the game since the beginning. Mega Man is one of those characters that sticks to you and sometimes I still cannot believe that we have the license to all these Capcom titles, as a huge fan of games all together. My favorite games are definitely Medal of Honor and Metal Gear Solid. My favorite nostalgic game has gotta be Ghouls 'n Ghosts!

What did you think of this year's E3? Did anything blow your mind there?
Uhm, other than all of those E3 models? Well, I was totally excited about Castlevania, Mega Man, Metal Gear Solid,

Final Fantasy XI Online. Man, there was just so many new games, not enough time to play in there. Three days to play all these games? They should extend E3 to a week!

Prior to the Capcom endeavor, Dreamwave did a Metroid comic for Nintendo...
The Metroid story we did was such a great opportunity with us. There are a bunch of guys at Dreamwave who are hardcore Metroid fans, and we put all our minds together to come up with a simple, yet animated style that would help gamers get a glimpse of what Metroid was all about. Nintendo was extremely supportive in this and thanks to all the kudos that Nintendo give us. We hope to do more with Nintendo in the near future and we look forward to getting the Metroid piece we did out in the direct market.

How much creative control has Capcom given you with their characters?
The Capcom creators are great. They were very helpful at E3, and we had a great understanding with one another in terms of the art direction. It was great to combine ideas together one-on-one with creators and producers such as [Capcom CEO] Tom Sekine, [Dream Ranch president] Kaz Matsumoto and [Maximo character designer] Susumu Matsushita. We're pretty excited to check out Capcom in Japan fourth quarter this year. The entire Capcom team has been really helpful.

Capcom has such a loyal following...how do you intend to live up to their expectations?
Dreamwave has [some of those] very loyal fans who have been following titles such as Mega Man, Rival Schools and Darkstalkers. My two closest friends, Doe (artist on Rival Schools) and Lou Kang (artist on Darkstalkers), are both so heavily into the realm of Capcom and understand the world from all different perspectives. I am very confident that our creative team will bring something innovative and new but at the same time still maintain the feel of Capcom in our line of books. Of course, since we are all big fans of Capcom, we are definitely going to tag team on each other so we all can get a piece of the pie!

Is there the possibility of any other Capcom titles? We'd kind of like to see Strider...or Onimusha...or Viewtiful Joe...
Whoa! Too much info... Wheels are already turnin'.

And your connection with video games goes both ways. I understand you're contributing artwork to the new Transformers video games. What's that like?
We have a great relationship with Atari. Steve Arthur over at Atari has been extremely excited about what we do here at the DW ranch and we are doing a lot of cross promoting with the company, mainly speaking of Transformers. We are doing a lot of the box artwork and working with Atari on different levels. Check out our booth at the San Diego Comicon and find some Atari/Dreamwave surprises!

Has Dreamwave ever considered creating art or characters for an original video game?
Yes... Uhm, wish I could say more. But yes, the thought has occurred many, many times.

Since you obviously could have had any creative job you wanted on the Capcom series, what drew you to Devil May Cry?
I love dark stories such as Blade Runner and Aliens, and felt that Devil May Cry was just so visually stunning. The gameplay is awesome as well, and I love how the world of DMC is so epic in proportion. There is much to add to the world of DMC and I think, from a publishing perspective, I believe the title is in the right place. Blood, blood, blood! More blood! Sorry, got carried away...

How do you go about taking the 3D world of Devil May Cry and turning it into panels on a page?
My team and I will use programs such as Painter 8 and Adobe Photoshop to do all our coloring and painting. DMC will be my first fully digitally painted book, other than the fact that I will be penciling it at first. Other than that, it's fully rendered by paint programs. Our goal? To give it the video-game feel, and I believe with the team that I have, we will capture that image.

DMC1's Trish or DMC2's Lucia: who's more your type?
Drool, drool...Trish.

Are there any other video game properties, from any game company, you'd like to license for comic books?
Yes, and it's in the works, but it's too bad I can't say more. Definitely pursuing more than what we've shown. It's all new and exciting to us, and look out for more gaming comic books from DW!

Who wins in a fight: Dante or Starscream?
I love Starscream! But...I think Dante would probably wipe that grin off his face.

"Our goal? To give it the video-game feel, and I believe with the team that I have, we will capture that image."

Devil May Cry

Fresh off their run on "Transformers: Generation 1 Vol. 2," writer Brad Mick and artist (and Dreamwave founder) Pat Lee will be taking Devil May Cry into the comic-book realm in early 2004 in a four-issue limited series. Plans call for the series to retell the story of the original Devil May Cry game while adding more depth to the story and to characters like Trish. Naturally, Dante's going to be kicking ass in gruesome fashion, and we might even get a glimpse into what happens between DMC1 and DMC2.

Mega Man

The Mega Man series kicks off Dreamwave's quintet of Capcom comics starting in September. Planned as an ongoing series, the Mega Man comic will not only feature the traditional gun-blazin' action as the Blue Bomber defends the city from Dr. Wily, but will also explore what Mega Man does in his off-hours: namely, going to junior high and trying to fit into society with the unfortunate name of Rocky Light. Experienced writer Brian Augustyn ("Crimson," "Out There") is handling the story, while impressive newcomer Michael Fong provides the art.

Interview

Bryan Augustyn // Mega Man writer

play: First things first: how did you become the writer of Mega Man?
Brian Augustyn: I've enjoyed a great relationship with Dreamwave over the last year or so, and we enjoy working together. Thanks to my work with Impulse, Crimson and Out There, I think there was a perception that I've done a reasonably decent job at writing younger characters, so that probably helped. I think it also helped that [creative director] James McDonough and I were very quickly on the same page as to what the Mega Man book should be.

How familiar are you with the Mega Man games? Were you a big fan?
I had a general awareness of the games and the character that goes back a dozen years or so—but that comes through good friends who are into games and anime mostly. Frankly, though I have since played the games and enjoyed them a lot, my eye-hand coordination is so lame that I usually lose. To get ready for the series, I did do plenty of research through comics, animation and a bunch of great websites devoted to the Blue Bomber.

How closely will the comic be tied to the stories, such as they were, of the Mega Man games?
Our comic's stories will be in the spirit of the game scenarios to be sure. We may use very similar set-ups and circumstances as well. We will definitely be seeing lots and lots of the familiar supporting cast and many of the evil robots and other villains. The fan of the game will feel very comfortable with the comic book. Comics are story- and character-driven, so the fans will be getting all the action, plus lots more of back-story and development than the games are set up to convey.

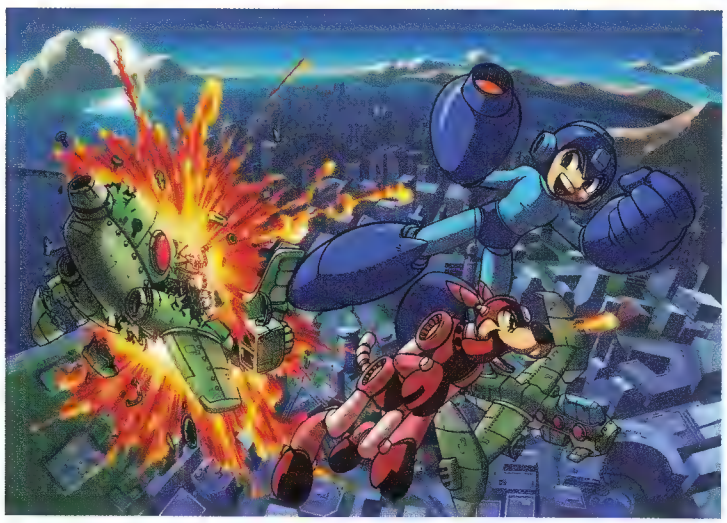
What is the setting?
As in the games, Mega Man will be living in and protecting Mega City. It's from the city that he will have derived his action name (the way that a sports figure might be called "The Bronx Bomber," or the "Cincinnati Flash").

Actually, in the first NES Mega Man, the city was Monsteropolis. What else can you tell us about the early issues in the Mega Man series?
The familiar Mega Man big action and high-and-wild adventure will definitely be on display, but we've added in some context and character development to take things to a higher level. In the first issues, we'll meet Mega and Dr. Light and all the other familiar characters such as Roll, his "sister," Rush the dog and others. In addition to that we're giving Mega Man a secret identity of sorts and sending him out to try to find a place in the human world. With the first issue, we'll see him being sent to Binder Junior High to expand his life and find his purpose. Of course, he'd rather be mixing it up with 30 giant robots than doing homework, but Dr. Light insists. In school, he'll be meeting new friends, making new and nasty enemies—and finding that school society can be even more dangerous than battling villains. Meantime, Dr. Light's great humanitarian inventions are being sabotaged by some unknown enemy and the stakes are getting higher with every passing day. If Mega Man and his kindly creator can't solve the mystery, an entire city is at risk.

Is the Mega Man comic going to span all the Mega Man series? We've got Mega Man X, Mega Man Legends, Mega Man Battle Network, etc.
Our Mega Man is the classic original version. But elements and characters from other versions might be worked in, in some cool and mysterious ways as the series progresses. There are schemes just bubbling away in our fervid imaginations as we speak.

How do you balance between the younger fans that Mega Man was originally designed for and the older, long-time fans that have been following Mega Man's exploits for the past 15 years?
I hope there's a common denominator for both groups in the fun and the action—and I believe they all love the character and will enjoy the logical evolution and expansion we're bringing to Mega Man, his world, his friends and foes.

Are we going to see a lot of Mega Man's trademark abilities from the games, like stealing enemies' powers?
We'll work up to many of those, I think. In the first issue, he flies and shows his amazing strength and uses his Buster—the arm cannon—quite a bit. I'd like to have his growing comfort and skills with his developing powers be part of his ongoing story.



"Comics are story- and character-driven, so the fans will be getting all the action, plus lots more..."

Maximo

Maximo writer Beau Smith ("Wynonna Earp," "The Tenth") compares the "Maximo" one-shot to something like Lord of the Rings meets a Tarintino film: medieval head-busting mixed with dark humor and edgy action. The story comes straight from the awesome game: Maximo's been betrayed, he's pissed off, he's literally been to hell and back, and he's determined to overcome any obstacle to get revenge on Achille and rescue his girl Sophia. With art by Alan Wang, "Maximo" will hit stores late 2003.

Rival Schools

Dreamwave hasn't revealed too much about Rival Schools—mostly because there's no writer signed onto the project just yet. However, we do know that the early artwork by Doe is looking spectacular, and that the comic will feature, without a doubt, the babelicious, kick-ass fighting the games are known for. Rival Schools' series format hasn't been determined yet, but is scheduled to hit sometime in 2004.

Darkstalkers

The story in Darkstalkers revolves around Morrigan's plan to open the Bloodgate, a permanent link between the Demon World and Earth. To do so, she needs to collect various elements, and as she does, encounters with characters like Demitri, Lord Raptor, Hsien Ko, Felecia, Donovan, Jon Talbain and B.B. Hood guarantee that all hell will break loose. Both writer Akira Yoshida (Record of Lodoss War, Nadeisco) and artist Lou Kang (Shidima, Sandscape) are Darkstalkers fans, so we expect good things from this limited series when it debuts in 2004.

Interview

Lou Kang // Darkstalkers artist

play: Can you give us a little background on how you became involved with drawing and with comic books?
Lou Kang: I began drawing at a young age. I don't know why and where I began, but I have a feeling it started out of boredom. The result of this was a long-lasting love for art. I first discovered comics at age six when my cousin introduced me to the Marvel universe. It was exciting for me to read about the Alpha Flight and X-Men. Since then I've collected comics in one form or another.

How big an influence on your work are anime and manga?
They are a huge influence in my work. My interests originated in Western-style comics and I had seen anime like "Fist of the North Star" growing up, but after I saw "Akira" for the first time, it changed a lot of things. I feel the same about manga. Every time I pick up a Blade of the Immortal, Agharta, or Naruto, I'm like a kid in a candy store.

Your art style seems perfectly suited to the Darkstalkers world. Is that one of the things that brought you to this project?
I am a huge fan of the Capcom world and I have a lot of respect for the design team. People like Bengus, Akiman and CRMK are major influences in my work. These elements definitely played a role in bringing me to Darkstalkers.

Are you a fan of the Darkstalkers game? Which character do you play as?
Yes I am a big fan of the game, but it doesn't mean I'm any good, (man I hate getting my ass kicked in games). [Rival Schools artist] Doe likes to remind me how much I should practice up on certain games. I'll get my revenge! Oh yeah, and my character is Jedah.

The art we've seen so far resembles the art from Night Warriors, with unique perspectives and exaggerated features. Is this the style we should expect from the final comic book?
This is the style I'll be working with. I'll make adjustments and modifications as I get deeper into the process and hopefully the final product will do the Darkstalkers name proud.

What other aspects of the games influence your art the most, and how?
I love the movements of the characters, color palettes, backgrounds and the overall packaging of the games. There is a certain grandeur felt when I play Capcom fighting games. There is a history and a world that seems epic and that really pushes me to look deeper into the games. They're just really fun. The simplicity, accuracy and visual intensity are very appealing.

What is your favorite Darkstalkers character to draw?
It was Morrigan, right now it's Demitri, but I've really been having fun drawing Felicia lately. And Jedah, he's just so bad-ass!

A number of the characters exude a very sexy quality; how do you convey this in your art?
Study lots of beautiful women for the female characters and look in the mirror to capture the big strong men! Ha ha ha! Plus I just wanna keep the lines soft and fluid and make sure the shots I choose maximize full sexiness.

Do you approach drawing Darkstalkers differently from how you approach drawing other artwork?
In a sense, I think I have a duty to do a good job on this title since there is such a large and devoted fan base for this game. On my previous books, it was always a fresh start and I was always trying to build a fan base. But now, I'm working with a built-in audience, something I haven't encountered before. I don't want people coming after me in search of blood if I'm not up to par! Otherwise, when it comes to drawing the book, I'll approach it the same as any other book, just trying to improve and challenge myself and take chances enjoying the experience along the way.

Is there art in any specific games that you particularly like or have made a big impression on you?
Capcom games like Darkstalkers, Street Fighter, Rival Schools. SNK games, Squaresoft games like the Final Fantasy series. Konami games like the Metal Gear Solid series.

The Darkstalkers comic isn't scheduled to debut until 2004. What will be keeping you busy until then?
Why? You guys looking for any new artists over there? :)

"There is a certain grandeur felt when playing Capcom fighting games. They're just really fun."

play MEDIA

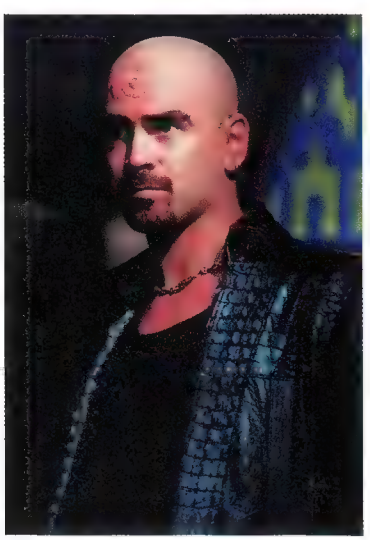
Solaris
Fox

Steven Soderberg's remake of the 1972 adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's classic sci-fi novel is without a doubt one of the finest works of science fiction ever put on film, with an assist from James Cameron, whose indelible fingerprints are all over the film's gorgeous production. Soderberg seemingly channeling Kubrick is a wonder to behold as he subtly peels back layer after layer of a compelling emotional conundrum that pierces the physical realm, letting the cinematography speak as loud as the dialogue. Natascha McElhone is sensational and I've always liked George Clooney, but this is the film that exposes him for the brilliant actor he has become. He can play it funny, suave, somber or serious, all in a day's work. Playing Kris Kelvin, a doctor sent to investigate a mysterious phenomena aboard a space station orbiting Solaris, he and the surviving crew are haunted by lost loved ones who materialize, flesh and bone. Between the moral and religious struggles among the remaining crew, flashbacks of Kelvin's bittersweet romance, marriage and ultimate tragedy are artfully woven into the film, which culminates in one of the best endings since *Eyes Wide Shut*. Extras include full-length audio commentary by Soderberg and Cameron, as well as the standard-issue HBO making-of featurette. Both are nicely done and well worth attending.-*DH*

movie: A
extras: B

Daredevil
Fox

The way I see it, there are two types of comic-book movies: flashy, bright, over-the-top fluff and serious, brooding character pieces: i.e. true comic adaptations. A fan of the latter, it's been a cool, cool summer. *X2* and *The Hulk* were both of that most audacious ilk, and *League of Extraordinary Gentleman* is yet to swoop in and cap it off, setting in motion the countdown to *HellBoy*. But the film that set me on the path was Daredevil, a film I think many panned out of jealousy, jumping on the "Mark Steven Johnson can't do this" and "Ben's too pretty" band wagon—oh, contraire. One of the reasons *Daredevil* works so well is because Affleck is so chiseled. Playing him gruff would be playing directly into the stereotype; seeing a token bad guy wriggle in discomfort means squat, seeing Ben chewing on Vicodin…that works. In fact, it all worked: David Keith and Joey Pants played it perfect, MCD is the only man alive able to pull off Kingpin, Colin Farrell was downright inspired as Bullseye, and Jennifer Garner, well, what can you say about Elektra besides "I pray she's not really dead"? This was a film beautifully shot, marvelously directed and shellacked with a perfect soundtrack thanks in no small part to Evanesance and the genius who involved them, Dave Jordan. The two-disc DVD is the definition of added value. Split between "The Film" and "The Comic," the initial documentary is like a how-to, unmasking pre-production, fight choreography, the CG, the suit (oh my god—hilarious) and begins with a chronology of how the movie found its way to production on a decade-long road littered with changing hands and red tape. It's hard to believe that in '97, Marvel was on the brink of bankruptcy—almost as hard as it is to believe that the actors survived this shoot. Watching this makes you really appreciate what everyone involved goes through to bring a production of this magnitude off. The full length "Enhanced Viewing" mode is also deeply informative, breaking down the 3D (you will not >



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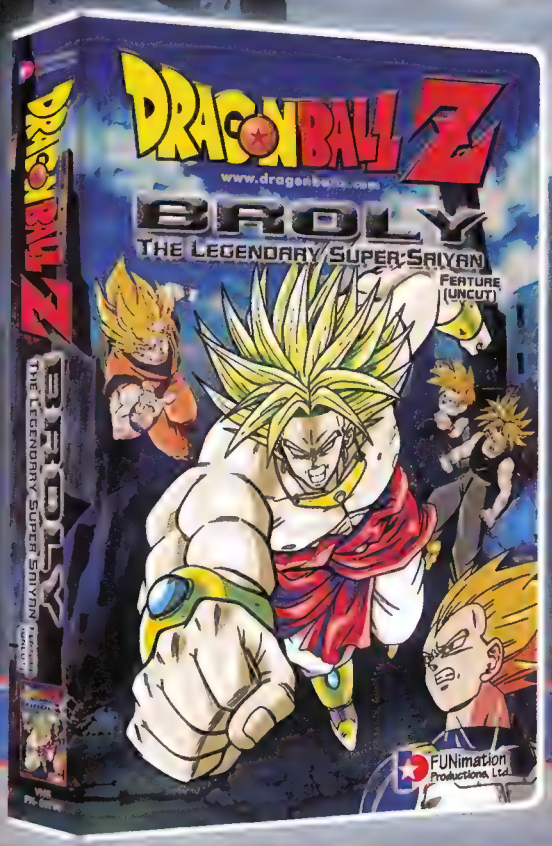

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believe how much of this film is CG), and the comic book feature is simply priceless. Who needs film school? *-DH*
movie: B
extras: A

Gangs of New York
Buena Vista

After years of yearning to bring *Gangs of New York* to the screen, accomplished director Martin Scorsese finally got his wish, landing an Oscar nomination in the process. Never before has the risky director enjoyed such an enormous budget, and he shows his resources sensationally. Every scene spills over with lavish production and grand set pieces, forcing you to look past some of the obvious missteps. Daniel Day Lewis delivers a devilishly raw performance as 1800s New York gang leader Bill the Butcher, who wears his name well. In this perilous war-threatened era, gangs fight for their territory with brutal methods that leave trails of blood in their wake. The hand-to-hand battles in the film sting, portrayed with raw intensity. Where *Gangs of New York* stumbles is in its hurried emotion and choppy depth; the film feels cut way shorter than it was originally intended to be, even at its long 165 minute running time. With such soft choices as including a U2 song to bookend the film, *Gangs of New York* is a little too crowd-pleasing to maintain its potential hold. Still, there are moments that stick with you in a way only a Scorsese film can. *-BF*
movie: B
extras: A-

Phone Booth
Fox

Without Colin Farrell, there is no *Phone Booth*—just a sorry excuse for a motion picture that would never have gotten made if not for Schumacher's Hollywood muscle, which is somehow still flexing after *Bad Company, Batman & Robin, 8mm*, and a host of decidedly icky films. Someone call Hans and Franz! But the problem with *Phone Booth* isn't so much the direction as much as it is the story, or lack thereof, about a likeable publicist, Stu Shepard, caught up in the NYC grind, singled out by a nut with a rifle, played predictably by Kiefer Sutherland. He doesn't want to die, we don't want him to die, and when he does "come clean," you end up liking the old guy better. So he wanted to diddle a prospect; what red-blooded man hasn't entertained that fantasy? Perhaps the idiocy of its existence is the hook, which may make for a good TV movie (it's a trim 80 minutes), but I can think of better ways to spend 20 bucks. Ferrell is incredible and the tension worth getting wrapped up in, in all of its ludicrousness, but you can phone this one in from Blockbuster. The scant extras include audio commentary with Joel Schu...zzzzzz. *-DH*
movie: C
extras: D

South Park: The Complete Second Season
Comedy Central/Warner Bros.

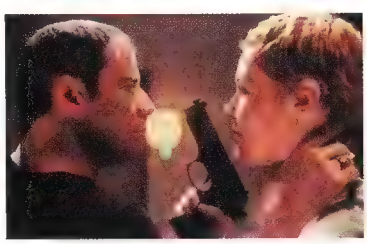
I'm probably the wrong guy to talk to about *South Park*: my instant messenger icon is Cartman blowing a flaming fart, I've watched *Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* at least a dozen times (its soundtrack has been living in my CD player since), I Tivo nearly every episode and I own way too much Cartman merchandise. For my money, *South Park* is the funniest satire, if not the funniest thing period, that TV has to offer. I've seen all of these episodes at some time or another, but owning them uninterrupted and on the fly is like icing on an already tasty cake. Who can forget Cartman's heart-wrenching performance as a bull-riding Vietnamese prostitute in Cow Days or when the bookmobile driver goes on a chicken f-----g rampage to motivate Officer Barbrady to learn to read (a touching commentary on small town life)? From Cartman's Mom is Still a Dirty Slut to Chef's Salty Chocolate Balls, season two is packed with memorable moments, although South Park has gotten progressively better with each passing season. The main extra on the Complete Second Season, the "Going Down to South Park" documentary, chronicles Trey and Matt's rise to fame (done tongue-in-cheek from their hot tub, in peak annoying form) and offers a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse into how the show is actually made (which is much more fascinating than you might think). It also offers insight to how big a venture South Park has become worldwide, grossing $300 million in merchandise alone. Now that's authoritah! *-DH*
episodes: A
extras: B-

Dracula II: Ascension
Dimension

I've seen worse—John Carpenter's Vampires and this film's prequel, *Dracula 2000*, spring to mind—but *Wes Craven's Dracula II: Ascension* is pretty DOA. Then again, when Jason Scott Lee and Jason London are the marquee talent, the odds aren't in the viewers' favor. But hey, plastic head manufacturers have to eat too, so here goes. In this dumb and dumber of vampire fables, a group of college nitwits stumble across a charred vampire corpse and decide to either sell it to the highest bidder or drag it off to an abandoned house in the country, submerge it into a tub of blood and then extract its vamp-essence to save their professor from the rigors of cerebral palsy... No, I'm being serious; that's the set up. From there it plummets into depths of idiocy so ignorant you have to wonder if the next place Wes Craven's name might appear will be on a box of Count Chocula. Jason Scott Lee plays a priest fighting off the dark side after being scratched by a pair of vampire hotties—driving around in an old Camry, looking to lop off heads and light up corpses—and Roy Scheider makes a cameo so lifeless you wish the shark had won. Extras include cast auditions and feature commentary with Patrick Lussier, not-so-special makeup effects supervisor Gary Tunnicliffe and screenwriter Joel Soisson...bloody boring. The best thing about *Dracula II: Ascension* is the *Kill Bill* preview before the feature. *-DH*
movie: D
extras: D

Basic
Columbia Tristar

If there was a sorrier big-budget action release last year, I fortunately haven't seen it. This bombastic, strained mess of a movie stars Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta, grunting and scowling their hearts out to the tune of a scatterbrained script. Set in the stormy jungle of Panama, *Basic* opens with a military operation gone horribly wrong. People are dead, fingers are pointing in every direction, no one is who they first seem. And does this all come down to drug corruption? Flashbacks cheapen and confuse the story, setting up too many convoluted surprises and miscues. Who is right, who is wrong, who is lying, who can really care? Director John McTiernan has been hit and miss lately, but you can always count on energy and style in his films. Here he delivers flash and polish, but it all comes off so empty and overbearing that you eventually fall into mental and emotional shutdown.
There's a decent amount of extras—director commentary, writer notes, making of—but the emptiness of the film makes them an unnecessary diversion. *-BF*
movie: D
extras: C+



Invincible
Warner Home Video

Invincible is rare filmmaking, a movie that isn't afraid to tackle serious themes with a touch of gentle grace and understated power. We've seen many films that deal with Nazi Germany and its oppressive, evil reign of terror, and they all speak to the horrors of the time with a similar style and effect. *Invincible* plays differently, sometimes casually, uniquely finding its heart, and terror, in the most uncommon places. The movie tells the story of a Jewish strong man, Zishe, who is discovered to be a performer in the Nazi Palace of the Occult. There is complete surrender to the loose narrative, which doesn't really tackle a traditional path of progression, leaving much surprise in every scene. The movie is essentially about the spirit of one man who exists solely as a source of pure inspiration to those around him. He is naive and wanting, capable of loving and caring simply because it seems the natural thing to do. The evil around Zishe is pervasive, but his goodness could not possibly allow it to breathe despite the mounting tragedy.
Extras here include ... nothing. Herzog has not made a fictional movie in years, and to have no insight into the movie or the director himself is an especially unfortunate omission. *-BF*
movie: B
extras: F

Ubi Soft + Future Primitive Soundsystem = XIII

words lucas mast

With each year bringing more and more challenges to ensure that your game stands apart from the rest, global game giant Ubi Soft has taken the promotion of their upcoming title XIII (based on Belgian author Jeanne Van Hamme's graphic novel of the same name) to a whole new level. The company has teamed up with Future Primitive Soundsystem, the pioneering San Francisco-based hip hop and turntablist record label, to produce a soundtrack for their conspiracy-laden spy-thriller game XIII to be released as a musical promotion piece in advance of the game's projected October release. **play** sat down with Ubi Soft brand manager John Coghlan and Future Primitive head honcho Mark Herlihy to chat about the future of music and games and the method behind the madness that is XIII.

"We were given a lot of leeway when it came to creating the music for XIII."

Music and gaming is certainly not a new symbiosis. EA's sports titles have routinely featured both new and established artists as the soundtrack to the games, and Rockstar took music to the nth degree with the release of Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. But Ubi Soft has taken a unique approach with XIII—the music will be released months ahead of the game, as part of a nationwide ad campaign that should reach new audiences in segments not usually focused on by the gaming industry. "We believe that the stylized retro funk noir feel of XIII will appeal to people who are ahead of the curve; those people who are into music before it hits the mainstream and set the standard for what is hip and cool," asserts Ubi Soft's Coghlan. Add to the soundtrack game voices being provided by hip hop goddess Eve, Batman's Adam West and X-Files alum David Duchovny, Ubi Soft is setting the bar high for pop-culture junkies and trend setters. "Future Primitive is a label that is certainly ahead of the musical curve and has arguably set the stage and broken in many musical artists now being embraced by the mainstream. We did not want a faceless label—we wanted someone who was out there, in touch with what the community was listening to," offers Coghlan. And with advertising campaigns set to run in urban and electronic music magazines like BPM Culture, Tokion, URB, Gas and XLR8R, and a seven-city club tour featuring the soundtrack's artists, Ubi Soft is taking progressive measures to merge music and gamers, and create a blueprint for promotional success. Adding to the tie-in will be a booklet that comes with the soundtrack which associates a character from the game with an artist on the soundtrack, allowing people to identify with both the DJs and the animated characters before the game drops.

When the first trailers for XIII hit E3 in 2002, the music was a far cry from the soundtrack laid down by the Future Primitive Soundsystem. It had a Paris electronica lounge feel, akin to the music of Daft Punk or Jacques Lu Cont. But when Future Primitive took the reins, the music took on a funk-infused rare groove and hip-hop feel. "We were given a lot of leeway when it came to creating the music for XIII. We have a really deep stable of incredibly talented artists that we were able to draw from and I think the resulting original tracks will blow people's mind," states Future Primitive's Herlihy. Most notable is Romanowski, who contributes three tracks on the XIII soundtrack, which should create a nice buzz in advance of his two EPs set to be released by Future Primitive, Steady Rockin' and Party in My Pants. Creating a soundtrack from scratch for an incomplete game may have been a daunting task to some, but not for the label that helped to break in such artists as DJ Z-Trip, Cut Chemist and DJ Shadow with their seminal Future Primitive Soundsessions.

Also on the decks for XIII are Faust and Shortee (also with an album set for release later this year by Future Primitive), legendary San Francisco DJ/producer J Boogie, Jack Dangers (of Meat Beat Manifesto fame), DJ Zeph, SWAT, DJ Pause and Bing Ji Ling. "The soundtrack was a great project for us—an association with a superpower in the gaming industry like Ubi Soft will help to grow our label and expose people to our roster of artists," enthuses Herlihy. With roots deep in the graffiti and urban artistic scene, Future Primitive seems like the logical choice to be the ambassador that introduces the gaming community to a new wave of fans. And with a new store, Headquarters, opening in the super-hip Haight area of San Francisco, a graffiti-inspired clothing label, and art gallery opening, it is likely that other savvy game publishers will be knocking on Future Primitive's door to help them bridge the gap between the ordinary and the super cool.

Websites:
www.whoisxiii.com
www.futureprimitivesound.com

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Exciting controllers

www.saitek.com
$79 (X45), $59 (RX600)

Saitek X45 and RX600

If Maverick would've had one of these babies, Goose might still be with us today. Saitek's X45 is the Cadillac of PC flight sticks. Talk about bells and whistles: the stick side features four buttons, a missile launcher, two eight-way hat switches and a pinky switch, while the throttle side boasts two fire buttons, a four-way hat switch, throttle and rudder controls, two rotary analog controls and an eight-way mouse controller. But what really makes this stick shine is the design and feel. The X45 feels less like a video-game stick and more like actual flight controls. Saitek's new pedal-free 915 Mhz wireless steering wheel for the PS2, the RX600, lasts 50 hours on four AAs and has dual-shock vibration feedback, cool, easy-to-reach paddle shifters for the gas and brake and a four-way D-pad. It also mounts on a desk or fits nicely in your lap and has eight analog buttons just in case you want to play a little Soul Calibur between races. We found it solid, smooth and well-constructed (the paddles are especially nice), but the RX's biggest assets are that it's pedal-free and wireless (recommended for distances up to 10 meters).

Power Mac G5

www.apple.com $1999–$2999

Aesthetes and graphics designers around the world have been waiting for the new pro towers from Apple, and the Cupertino-based computer maker has not disappointed. Behold the aluminum-encased Power Mac G5. By various measurements, it is the fastest personal computer ever made in its 2Ghz dual G5 processor configuration. This spec also includes a 1Ghz frontside bus for each processor, giving it a nearly bottleneck-free architecture. And naturally, the build and design are simply second to none. *–MH*

Tiny camera

Creative Labs CardCam

www.creative.com
$99

With all this talk about size, why not go a little smaller? Creative Labs is once again pushing the boundaries of consumer electronics, this time with the world's thinnest digital camera. The CardCam weighs a mere 1.3 ounces and measure 6mm thin. What's unbelievable is that the CardCam can take digital pictures at 1280 X 960 resolution, which translates to 1.3 Megapixels. With 8MB of integrated memory, the CardCam stores up to 26 photos at the highest resolution and 101 photos at 640 X 480. Unfortunately, even though the CardCam is small and sleek-looking, it doesn't take the greatest of pictures. And with the lack of any flash, you'll be using this primarily out of the house. But if you're looking for something that'll fit in your wallet and takes decent pictures for under a hundred dollars, the CardCam might be worth checking out.

Portable media player/recorder

Dell XPS

www.dell.com
$1999 and up

Taking an ambitious step into the ultra-high-end, hardcore-gaming PC market is Dell with their latest dream box, the XPS. Complete with a new sexy case design, surprisingly quiet fans and incredible performance (coupled with Dell's excellent track record of customer service), their new XPS line could definitely give Alienware some much-needed competition.

Under the hood of our test system, the XPS has Intel's brand-new 875P chipset and 3GHz Pentium 4 processor, 1024MB DDR-SDRAM (DDR-400), 2x120 GB Serial ATA hard drives in a RAID 0 configuration and ATI's Radeon 9800 Pro. Sound was handled by a Creative Labs' fantastic Audigy 2 Sound Card and Logitech Z-680 speakers. A great feature of the XPS is the combo DVD-RW/CD-RW drive (which writes to DVD-R discs at 4X) and a 16X DVD-ROM. Native support for USB 2.0 and Serial ATA drives translates to fast access to your data and peripherals.

From a performance standpoint, you really can't go wrong with the XPS system. Although the XPS out performed the Alienware's Area-51, it's not as fast as similar machines equipped with nVidia's new FX 5900 Ultra. Will you notice? Probably not. We tested the XPS with every hot game on the market, with resolutions set at the highest possible settings. The XPS performed flawlessly.

Bottom line, this is the perfect PC for the hardcore gamer who wants the performance and reliability but could care less about getting a custom paint job on their rig. Happy gaming.

artificial
but not intelligent

TX Head/Arnold Litho

Sideshow is at it again, sculpting the utmost quality merchandise for yet another blockbuster film franchise. Wondering what to give the guy who has everything? See left. While you're at it, check in on possibly the coolest Arnold collectible ever, this stunning 500 pc. limited, signed, 17" x 25" offset lithograph printed on heavyweight acid-free archival paper and framed to museum standards. www.sideshowtoy.com

Akira: Tetsuo PVC

The latest in Akira collectibles is this beautiful pre-painted, meticulously detailed PVC statue of Tetsuo from Toycom ($34.99). www.toycom.net

Demon Dog Rabbit

Based on the outrageous art of Michel Gagné from his book (yes, there's a book) "Insanely Twisted Rabbits," it's Demon Dog Rabbit! He's polystone, hand-painted and finished, and oh-so-loveable. Bring one home today signed for just $39.99!
www.sideshowtoy.com

South Park

Finally, South Park figures! After the McFarlane line left the building, we feared they may never spread their joy in a town near you, but their authoritah has been respected by Mirage Toys with the first wave of 7" figures due this July. Pre-orders are going on now at toycom.net

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Language
Mild Violence

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

PlayStation.2

XBOX

Acclaim®
acclaim.com/games/xgra

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